

## devil town

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Characters:	<a href="#">Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Alexis   Quackity</a> , <a href="#">Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Karl Jacobs</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
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# devil town

by [hoorayy](#)

## Summary

The night Tommy disappeared, it went like this:

Tubbo screamed the words that became his goodbye. He can't accept that Tommy is gone, because that would be accepting that the last words they exchanged were angry and intended to hurt. So he doesn't accept it. He'll search for years if he has to.

Techno let Tommy leave without so much as trying to stop him. He's replayed the memory of that night and wished he'd done anything else, until he thinks the guilt might be enough to destroy him. He thinks he might already be on his way there.

And Quackity can't help but feel like this is all just a bitter echo. This town is cursed, and Tommy is only its latest victim.

—

( the small town horror au where tommy goes missing and it all goes downhill from there! )

## Notes

hello everyone!

so i feverishly outlined an entire fic this weekend, and then wrote the first chapter in one sitting. i'm really really excited about it - it's going to explore some fun ideas and character dynamics, and i can't wait to get to them. i haven't had a multi-chapter fic OR a heavily plot-focused fic going in years, so i'm both nervous and excited to be posting this!! really hope you guys like it as much as i've enjoyed coming up with it <3

obligatory "this is about the dream smp characters and not the real people who play them" message! this is a modern setting, but it's still just the characters.

content warnings: this fic may include some dark elements such as death, kidnapping, abuse, depression and other mental health issues, as well as generally eerie and unsettling vibes. i warn for specific/major warnings in chapter notes. in addition to the warnings already mentioned, there is so much discussion of grief and trauma as major themes in this story that it will be absolutely impossible to avoid them. play it safe if any of those are upsetting to you!

my plan is to update weekly on sundays! i tend to write faster when i am excited though, so there may be surprise updates as well (especially if i get a lot of comments - my writing motivation thrives off of them, so if you want an update faster...)

i'll stop talking now so you can get on to the fic, hope you lovelies enjoy!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [devil town](#) by [Fressys](#)
- Translation into Français available: [Devil Town](#) by [N000dle](#)

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The night that Tommy disappeared is burned into Techno's memory forever.

He's turned it over every which way, followed it down familiar paths and questioned every aspect until his mind spun. Every detail, every decision he made, everywhere he went wrong. Since it happened, he hasn't slept, instead staring at the ceiling and wondering what he could've done differently. *Should've* done differently.

He plays it over and over, a hundred times in one day. When he reaches the end of it, all he's accomplished is making himself feel sick.

The memory replays again.

Techno is sitting at the kitchen table, trying to finish a nearly overdue essay. Phil is at work; he'd just texted Techno saying it'll be at least another two hours before he can leave. It's already ten. Techno wishes this was a more unusual occurrence than it is.

(If Phil had come home early, he thinks, things might have gone differently. But he doesn't want resentment towards anyone but himself, can't bear to have that bitterness building up in him. So he lets the thought go as quickly as it occurs to him.)

They'd had money to order out for dinner, cash left behind by Phil, but they'd argued about what they wanted. Tubbo and Tommy were both tense. Techno thinks something happened at school, but he's not the one they ever went to for that kind of shit, so he doesn't ask. He let them bicker over pizza versus Chinese until he couldn't focus on his essay over the sound of it anymore, and then he'd snatched the money off the counter and told them to eat leftovers instead.

(In his head, he takes Tommy's side. He orders pizza, and Tubbo pouts but ultimately all three of them sit at the kitchen table with their slices. Techno even presses to ask why they're both so tense with one another. He talks, he listens, he puts his stupid fucking essay aside and he focuses on his brothers.)

In the memory, Techno sits back down at his laptop and ignores them as they dig through the fridge in sulking silence.

It's after they've all had something to eat and Techno has made frustratingly little progress on his essay, that the argument between the two boys escalates. Upstairs, something crashes to the floor, and then he hears a shout. He hesitates first, frustration bitter in his chest. They're seventeen; they should be capable of solving their own arguments, shouldn't they? Does Techno always need to play intermediary?

*“Fine!”* He hears Tubbo shout, words audible despite them being on entirely separate floors. Techno can count on one hand the number of times he’s heard Tubbo raise his voice in frustration. *“Have it your way then, god knows that’s all you ever get!”*

Techno is up on his feet and headed for the stairs then, essay left once again interrupted and unfinished. His younger brothers’ bedroom door is ajar. He doesn’t like to barge in, so he would’ve simply knocked and waited for an answer, but Tommy has just started shouting back.

“I do *not* only ever get my way! You’re acting like a selfish child, Tubbo—”

*“I’m acting like a child?! You —!”*

Techno pushes open the door more aggressively than he intends. It hits something on the floor - someone’s backpack - and stops there with a thud. Tommy and Tubbo freeze at the interruption.

They’re both in pyjamas, which makes the argument they’re in the middle of all the more ridiculous. Tubbo sits on the edge of his bed, arms crossed over his honeybee-patterned t-shirt and curled in on himself in frustration. Tommy is standing in the middle of the room, striped pj pants and all, arms thrown wide and face crumpled.

(Techno steps inside carefully, easing the door shut behind him. There’s a hundred things he could say.

“You two wanna talk this through with kinder voices?” is one of them. “How about we slow down and you explain what’s gotten you both so upset?”

“You two care about each other,” is another. “Whatever petty spat you’re having right now isn’t worth the anger you’re throwing at one another. Don’t do this to each other.”

“We still have cash,” yet another. “Let’s go for a drive and get ice cream from the gas station.”

He says any of those things, and he watches the tension drain from their shoulders and the anger fade from their eyes. They talk things through. They’re all okay.)

“Hey,” Techno says, still standing in the open doorway and frustration still in his throat. “It’s ten at night. You wanna save the screamin’ your heads off for a time when people aren’t asleep next door, or trying to write an English essay that’s due in two hours?”

Tommy glowers at him. “Fine. Whatever. Fuck you.”

He yanks a hoodie from where it’s thrown on his bed and pushes past Techno, footsteps stomping down the hall and the stairs. Tubbo gets to his feet too, starting to go after him, but Techno stops him with one hand.

“Give him some space,” Techno says. “Looks to me like you both need to cool off.”

(In his mind, he stops Tommy with an easy hand instead, corrals him back into the bedroom and doesn't let him leave until he's solved this thing with Tubbo. In his mind, the moment Tommy storms out of the room, Techno turns to walk after him.

"Let's go for a drive," Techno says. "Let's walk together. Don't go on your own, Tommy."

In his head, he isn't afraid to beg. In his head, on replay, the most important thing is to just keep him here.

"Don't leave alone," he says. "Don't leave. Please don't go.")

Tubbo deflates. He sits down on his bed again.

"You wanna talk about it?" Techno asks.

"No," Tubbo mutters. He kicks at the blankets on his bed and starts to burrow under them. In seconds, all Techno can see is the tips of messy brown hair.

He stays in the doorway a moment longer. A muffled slam from the front door is heard from elsewhere in the house.

He sighs. "Okay. Goodnight, Tubbo."

It's a long second before Tubbo offers his grumbled reply. "Night."

Techno flicks off the light switch and eases the door shut on his way downstairs. He takes his phone out and sends a text to Tommy.

*(10:03) techno: don't be out long. it's a school night.*

*(10:05) tommy: fuck you bixcth*

Techno should go after him. This is not a thought he gives himself later, after he's worn this memory into often-traveled paths and bitter what-ifs. This is one he has in the moment as he looks from the screen of his phone to the laptop sitting on the kitchen table to the car keys hanging on the fridge.

Tommy hasn't been great lately. Techno doesn't even know why, hasn't pushed and prodded enough to get an answer, though he'd suspect it has to do with Wilbur. He was supposed to come home for a week, and he'd bailed on them at the last minute. Techno isn't surprised, and even if Phil was disappointed, Techno's sure he wasn't surprised either. Tubbo doesn't show anything ever, so he doesn't know how he took it. Tommy, though—even after everything, Tommy still looks up to Wilbur like he hung the stars himself.

Techno doesn't want to put the blame for this on anyone but himself. He doesn't want to face those feelings. He doesn't let himself entertain *what if Wilbur had just come home, what if*

*Wilbur called a little more, what if Wilbur was there to talk to Tommy.*

He doesn't want to think about those. He pushes them away.

Techno should have driven after Tommy. He shouldn't have let him out of his sight. He should've known, somehow, that this was a night he desperately needed to do better. To do more. To be the older brother Tommy needed.

Instead, Techno opens up his laptop and he sits down at the kitchen table again. He loses himself in research and in writing, one tab opened after another as the night ticks slowly by. Phil is still not home. Tubbo is still in bed. Tommy is still angry.

He doesn't realize the time passing until he's submitting his essay and it's nearly midnight.

The front door hasn't opened once.

(In the memory, this is when the sick feeling sinks into his stomach. In his mind, it has never left.)

He's on his feet and back upstairs as soon as he realizes the time. Their bedroom door is closed as he'd left it. Inching it open, he peers inside.

Tommy's bed is empty. Tubbo's hair is still visible over the edge of his comforter.

For an awful, awful moment, Techno is frozen in place. He doesn't know what to do. Tommy isn't back. His mind supplies him with a hundred horrible things that could've happened, a string of terrible, *terrible* incidents that could have, might have, *are* happening to his brother *right now*.

In the memory, he staves them off. He goes back to the kitchen and gets his phone, hoping for a text from Tommy, but there's nothing. It's been almost two hours. *How hadn't he noticed it had been two hours?*

"Techno?"

He turns. Tubbo stands at the foot of the stairs, rumpled honeybee t-shirt and wide, bleary eyes. For a second, Techno feels like he can't breathe.

"Tommy didn't come back," Techno blurts out.

Tubbo looks like he wakes up in an instant. Neither of them need to say anything else. Tubbo scrambles for his shoes and jacket, and Techno dials Tommy's phone number as he grabs his keys.

It rings and rings and rings. It goes to an automated voicemail Tommy never set up.

He dials again. He slips on Phil's dumb sandals left by the front door as he rushes outside, Tubbo on his heels. Neither of them remember to lock the door.



“Tommy!” Tubbo screams, hands cupped around his mouth. It’s midnight. The whole street is asleep. Techno couldn’t care less. He hopes they all wake up.

Tommy’s voicemail picks up. Techno hangs up. He dials again.

(This is the worst part of the memory. The moment where Techno now knows it is far too late to change anything. The part where the Techno of the past doesn’t know yet that it’s too late. In his memory, he still hopes and hopes he’ll see his brother sitting on some sidewalk under a dimly lit street lamp, or passed out on a McDonalds booth seat while the only employee sweeps up in the back, or any of a dozen other hiding places Techno can think to look in. He still hopes he’ll answer his phone if he keeps calling it. He still hopes they’ll go home and find Tommy there, laughing at them for being all worked up over nothing.

The Techno of his memory doesn’t know yet what the Techno of now does. And it’s the worst part of the memory to walk down; the part where nothing he does matters anymore.)

They drive up and down every street. It’s a small town; they live in the middle of fucking nowhere and there’s not many places to look. There’s not a lot of places to hide. They drive down barely-paved roads out to the farms, and Tubbo screams out his window into wide-open fields and abandoned barns. They drive down neighborhood streets, all with lights out and darkened windows, and Tubbo shouts his name there too. They circle the McDonalds parking lot, drive behind the only grocery store within thirty minutes, and even check the movie theatre that doesn’t open on weeknights. There’s nothing else in this town besides that, so then they’re on the other side of town, where the woods are.

Techno has called Tommy eight times. He’s left a voicemail on two of them, begging him to answer. Desperate for him to pick up or call back.

Techno pulls over to the side of the road then, and his shaky fingers type in Phil’s number instead. Beside him, he can hear Tubbo quietly whispering, “no, no, no.”

Techno swears he can hear the words “not again.” It aches in his chest and it weighs heavy in his stomach. He feels sick in this memory. He hasn’t stopped feeling sick since.

He can’t get himself to call Phil. His finger hovers over the button to call, but he can’t press it. Can’t figure out what words he’d use.

He switches screens and texts his father instead.

*(12:18) techno: tommy’s missing.*

*(12:18) techno: he went on a walk two hours ago. sorry*

They’re still parked in front of the woods. Tubbo’s face is drawn and pale in the glare of the streetlight above him. Techno should feel guilty for bringing him here, especially in this fucking situation, but he can’t separate that feeling from the overwhelming anxiety already

roiling in his gut. He reaches across the dash and opens the glovebox in front of Tubbo, taking out the flashlight there.

“You don’t have to come with me,” he tells him. “I’m going to look.”

Tubbo looks like he’s going to be sick.

Techno’s phone is buzzing in his pocket. He takes it out. Phil is calling.

(In his mind, he answers it. He owns up to what he’s done here and now. He doesn’t run and hide. He talks to his own father and tells him what had happened. He gets Tubbo out of here, because it doesn’t even matter how much they look tonight. At this point, all he can do is take care of Tubbo. Tommy’s already gone.)

In this memory, he puts the phone in Tubbo’s lap.

“Tell Phil to pick you up,” he says. And then he climbs out of the car and closes the door, barely sparing a glance behind him as he jogs into the woods, flashlight in hand.

He shouts Tommy’s name until his voice is hoarse. He walks until his feet ache and his flashlight starts to flicker. It’s all absolutely hopeless, which he knows later. Which he’s starting to realize now.

He stands in the middle of the woods and everything is dark and it is fuzzy and it is cold and it is lonely. Everything is wrong. He’s sick to his stomach, he’s frozen, his hands weigh more than they should. Tommy isn’t here. Tommy isn’t anywhere that Techno could think to look.

Techno wants to scream. He shouts Tommy’s name one more time. His flashlight flickers dangerously.

Part of him wants to stay here until the light goes out entirely. Until he has to wait for the sun to come up to make his way home. To be lost and stranded and to deserve it, at least a little.

Common sense makes him turn on his heel.

When he finally makes his way back to the street, he finds Phil waiting for him by the car, arms folded. Tubbo is nowhere in sight.

Techno can’t meet his eyes. He just climbs into the passenger seat.

“Techno,” Phil starts from the driver’s side.

“I’m sorry,” Techno interrupts before he can say anything else. Exhausted panic bubbles out of his mouth. “I looked everywhere. I drove everywhere, I called him, I just kept callin’ him even though he wouldn’t answer, and I shouldn’t have let him leave but I did and I’m sorry, I’m trying to fix it—”

“*Techno*,” Phil says again, more forcefully. Techno’s words die and rot right there on his tongue. “I’m not angry with you.”

Techno is silent. In the memory, the statement from Phil falls on deaf ears, because Techno is angry with himself, and Phil's feelings don't mean anything to him just then.

Phil starts the car. He pulls onto the road.

"Is Tubbo okay?" Techno asks. His voice sounds too small for it to be his.

Phil stares straight ahead. "He's home. He's scared."

Techno breathes out a shaky breath. He shouldn't have left him alone. Tubbo shouldn't be alone at all right now. Their family isn't meant to be split up like this.

"I'm sorry," Techno says again.

Phil taps his fingers on the steering wheel. "I wish you hadn't run off like that, especially without your phone. But I'm still not upset with you. I'm just worried."

This is a massive understatement. Phil's voice is carefully calm, and Techno's very sure that it's for his own sake and no other reason.

(He still wonders how much less composed Phil had been when Techno couldn't see. When it was just him and Tubbo. Tubbo, terrified and alone, and Phil, frantic and helpless, at work thirty minutes away and unable to even help search. He hates to imagine it, so he tries not to. He's a coward, deep down, and the idea of seeing so much unchecked emotion from both of them scares him.)

Phil fills him in on everything he's done since Techno texted him. The people he'd called, the places he'd looked. Techno nods along numbly.

In this memory, there is only one thing left to do. There is a gaping miserable ache left stretching in front of him, forever and ever, until the present where Techno lies sleepless on his own bed. Tommy's bed is still empty. Tommy's bed is empty and Techno feels sick and time is a long, messy, indiscriminate pit that Techno will be falling through forever.

But there is one thing left in this memory before time falls apart.

There is a sun coming up over the horizon, and there is a greying sky and a parked car and the beep of a lock as Techno gets out. There is a stretch of sidewalk to either side of their little house which is already too empty, has been too empty since Wilbur left and is now a thousand times worse.

And on the side of the sidewalk is Tommy's phone, broken and shattered thirty feet from his own front door.

*Thirty feet.*

He was thirty feet away.

Time stretches on infinitely in front of Techno.

## Chapter End Notes

giveaway in the comments section, leave a comment and you could win my undying love and affection /p

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Techno's hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Can we not do this?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You're only here because Tommy's gone," Techno says sharply. "Stop dancing around it. Tommy's fucking gone."

Wilbur looks like Techno had hit him, eyes wide, mouth open and silent. He thinks he'd feel bad if he could feel anything separate from the twisting in his stomach.

"Sorry," Wilbur says finally, his voice strained. "I'm... Sorry."

Techno waits for him to say anything else.

He doesn't.

### Chapter Notes

remember what i said last chapter about updating faster when i'm excited? yeah. surprise early update!!

i've added a few new tags - mostly characters introduced in this chapter. also, please remember that this fic has dark elements in it. content warning in particular for this chapter for a possibly disturbing description of death/decay in the last few paragraphs. please be careful if that will bother you!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I'm sorry."

Tubbo looks up from the dining table. It had taken everything in Techno to get the two words out, and now Tubbo looks at him like he's looking through him, like he's searching every aspect of his brother's soul to decide if it was sincere. If he should accept it.

"For leaving you in the car." His voice comes out hoarse. There's more Techno could apologize for, but this is what he's apologizing for now. "That—it was shitty of me. I should've known better."

Phil is on the phone in the next room. His voice rises, just on the verge of anger, and they can make out a few words.

*Look for him now. He didn't run away.*

It hits Techno like a punch in the gut, another in a long series he's been feeling all day. Tommy is gone.

Tubbo's gaze does not get any lighter. "It was shitty to be left there."

Techno feels sick, sick, sick. "I know. I'm sorry."

He turns and he runs from the kitchen.

Phil's busy today, filing reports at the police station and calling everyone he can possibly think of and more. So that leaves Techno to drive the hour-long trip to the train station and pick up his twin.

Tubbo climbs into the passenger seat of the car without a word. Techno feels—he *wants to feel* that what his little brother is offering is forgiveness. Tubbo meets his eyes with a quick press of his lips that could've been a smile. Techno can't even give him that much back, but he dips his head in some sort of acknowledgement.

Neither of them say anything the entire drive.

It's been sixteen hours since Techno didn't stop Tommy from leaving.

Early afternoon sun filters through grimy windows. Tubbo is asleep on Techno's shoulder, despite the uncomfortable wooden bench beneath them. He's careful to keep his shoulder still and angled so that Tubbo's head doesn't slip off of it. This is the least he can do to make up for the night before, he thinks.

He turns his phone over in his hands, waiting for a message to light up the screen. The last communication he'd had was twenty minutes prior.

*(1:52) techno: we're here.*

*(1:57) wilbur: train should arrive by 2:15*

*(1:57) techno: cool*

Techno has been staving off bitterness all day. He wishes this reunion with Wilbur wasn't so soured. He tries to keep the thought out of his head that whispers, "*Of course it's now that he comes home. Now that it's too late and there's nothing left to do.*"

A train whistle pierces through his thoughts. Tubbo startles off of his shoulder, and Techno reaches an instinctive arm out to steady him. For a moment, Tubbo stares around in confusion, half-asleep and dazed, before his face settles into disappointed recognition.

It aches in Techno's chest. It's the first time any of them have slept. He wonders if Tommy had been back in Tubbo's dreams.

The train pulls into the station.

The first glimpse Techno gets of Wilbur is his shoes. Worn hiking boots, laces wrapped around and tied at the back, stepping down onto the platform just in front of them. Techno shifts his gaze upwards. The rest of his brother looks... exactly as he should, Techno guesses. An oversized mustard yellow sweater hangs off of his tall, lanky frame; circular frames perched on his nose; wild hair peeking out from under a beanie.

He looks the same as always. He looks like he'd never left. He has a smile on his face. It all sits heavily in Techno's stomach.

"Hey," Wilbur says, tone too bright for the circumstances. There's a backpack and a guitar case slung over one shoulder and a suitcase in his hand. He's really going to stay.

Techno pushes himself to his feet. Tubbo echoes the movement. "You need help carrying any of that?"

"I've got it," Wilbur says. He adjusts his backpack. "Hey, Tubso."

Tubbo eyes him. There's a glimpse of wariness in his eyes, just for a moment, before he answers. "Hey Wil."

Techno glances at Wilbur. If he'd noticed Tubbo's hesitance, there's no sign of it on his face. He walks ahead confidently instead, gesturing with one hand.

"Where'd you park?"

Techno follows after him, leading him to the car. Wilbur tosses his suitcase and backpack into the trunk and then climbs into the passenger side. Tubbo's already sitting in the backseat.

When they're all in the car, Techno stops. He feels frozen again. His hands are too heavy for his arms, and he's sick to his stomach as always. There's three of them in the car. It's the right number, just him, Wilbur, Tubbo - but it feels wrong. He feels like he's missing something. Something is wrong and it crawls under his skin. It aches in his head and pounds at his temples.

It buzzes in his mind and rings in his ears. He feels fuzzy, frozen, far-away.

Is this going to be another memory he picks through someday? What is he doing wrong right now that he's going to regret forever?

Wilbur's staring at him. He's been still for too long, he realizes, keys in hand halfway to the ignition and not an inch farther.

"Are you okay?" Wilbur asks, his voice muffled and muddy. Any hope of an honest reply is dead and rotting in Techno's throat.

"I'm glad you're back," Techno forces out with a rough voice. He doesn't think he means it, but he'll regret saying anything else.

He starts the car.

Tubbo falls asleep again in the car. Techno's glad he can sleep. Neither Techno or Phil have had a chance to even really sit down, let alone close their eyes, with everything going on. Which Techno is fine with. He doesn't want to try to sleep and let his brain wear down enough to keep spinning that awful memory over and over until he's delirious from it.

The cost is that he hasn't slept in about thirty-six hours at this point, and it's starting to get to him. His mind runs unchecked down paths he's been trying to keep it away from.

Wilbur keeps fiddling with the radio, quietly singing along under his breath. Techno wants to turn the radio off. He wants to hear Wilbur's voice clearer. He wants to join in, he wants to tell him to be quiet, he wants the nauseous feeling in his stomach to get any lighter.

The highway races by outside. Techno taps his fingers on the steering wheel, then sneaks another glance at his twin.

He and Wilbur used to look a lot more alike, when they were younger. They were never identical, but they did their best to act like they were. Before Wil hit that last growth spurt and ended up a good three inches taller but never filled out in weight, unlike Techno, they'd had the same haircut. It wasn't until they were twelve that Wilbur decided he wanted his shorter, and Techno let his go the opposite direction. It was the same color then too, and had been even into their teen years.

At fourteen, they both dyed it blue in their bathroom sink while Phil wasn't home. It wasn't that they'd thought he'd say no; they just wanted to do it themselves. It didn't count as rebellion if all their father had done was roll his eyes fondly and make them an appointment with a professional hairdresser to fix the damage they'd done. But it had felt that way when they'd done it. Like sneaking a box of cheap bleach and dye into the house was something so cool and grown-up.

After the blue washed out, they both went red. It faded and Techno liked the pink. Wilbur went back to brown, while Techno kept the color, trying out every shade from pastel to bubblegum before settling on the pale rose that's been the same for the last six years with very little change.

Wilbur and Techno still look recognizably like brothers, even with the differences. They have the same eyes that crinkle up when they smile, though Wilbur showcases it more. They have the same chin, the same shitty eyesight and glasses on their matching noses. They still look alike, just not as much as they once had. Wilbur looks older than him. They don't look like twins anymore.

That aches in Techno's chest too. They're still brothers. They don't feel like the twins they used to be.

When they were sixteen, they'd each pierced one ear. They bought pairs of earrings and split them, one a piece, two halves of a whole.

Techno still has every last one. He wonders if Wilbur kept his.



By the time they were seventeen, Wilbur had already stopped talking. Not entirely, just about the important things. He'd asked Phil if he could move into the spare bedroom, and Techno never could figure out why. Wilbur said he just wanted the space. Wanted to spread out more, wanted to play his music without bothering Techno, a list of other excuses that never seemed to explain it. They needed to get used to not living in the same room anyway, Wil had said, for college.

Techno had thought they'd be roommates then too. It had never even occurred to him that they'd want to choose otherwise.

At eighteen, Wilbur moved out for college. Techno enrolled in online classes.

Somebody needed to stay home. Tubbo had recently moved in. Tommy was only fourteen then. Tubbo was fourteen and his whole life had been kicked out from underneath him. Somebody else needed to be there.

So Techno had withdrawn his application from the school he and Wilbur had always planned to go to together. Someone needed to stay.

Wilbur got to be the one to leave.

Wilbur is home now.

He's looking into the rear view mirror, gaze on Tubbo, who is slumped against the window and snoring softly.

"How's he been?" Wilbur asks quietly, his eyes not leaving Tubbo.

Techno shrugs. He doesn't know what to tell him. "You mean since last night? Cuz the answer to that one is shitty." Like everyone else.

Wilbur frowns. "In general. With... everything. Adjusting."

"It's been three years. I think he's adjusted at this point."

Wilbur finally looks away, straight out the windshield this time. "Right. Yeah. I just... wasn't sure. He's always so quiet when I visit, I never know if he's settling in okay."

"He's always quiet in general," Techno says. Which isn't exactly true, because Tubbo can shout and screech as loud as Tommy, and *has* shouted and screeched too, flipped board games and thrown pillows and popcorn, and he's laughed so loud and long it had to have hurt his throat. But he only does that around a small handful of people, and Techno prides himself in being one of those people. If Wilbur doesn't get that side of Tubbo, then that's on him.

And there's that resentment again. Techno reminds himself he's trying to avoid that.

Wilbur looks like he doesn't know what else to say. Techno can relate. "How's Dad?" he asks finally.

Techno wants to laugh at him. This is the most fake and forced conversation the two brothers have ever had. “Busy. As he always is.”

“Sounds like him,” Wilbur says.

“Yep,” Techno says.

He takes an exit off of the highway, into the woods. There’s a gravel trail on this road that leads to an abandoned coal mine, where sixteen year old Wilbur and Techno had snuck off to one night. The whole crew was together then - Dream, George, Sapnap, Karl, Quackity. They’d dared each other into exploring deeper into the mine, and Quackity somehow had brought the shittiest beer any of them would ever taste. But they were sixteen then, so it’s not like any of them knew any different, and they all pretended like they enjoyed the taste.

“How are you?” Wilbur asks. “How’s school going?”

Techno’s hands tighten on the steering wheel. “Can we not do this?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re only here because Tommy’s gone,” Techno says sharply. “Stop dancing around it. Tommy’s fucking gone. This catching up bullshit is just that, it’s bullshit. Tommy’s gone and that’s what you should be asking me about.”

Wilbur looks like Techno had hit him, eyes wide, mouth open and silent. He thinks he’d feel bad if he could feel anything separate from the twisting in his stomach.

“Sorry,” Wilbur says finally, his voice strained. “I’m... Sorry.”

Techno waits for him to ask anything else.

He doesn’t.

Wilbur goes back to fiddling with the radio. They don’t speak again the rest of the drive.

—

Quackity wakes up with a stiff neck, a headache, and his stomach grumbling. *Loudly.*

He tries to roll off Sapnap’s shitty, ugly couch before his eyes are fully open. The blanket he’d halfway kicked off overnight ends up tangling around his legs and he loses his balance, tipping off the couch and crashing to the floor.

Great. Excellent morning.

He's grumbling the sentiment to himself under his breath as he untangles his legs from the blanket, and then makes his way to the kitchen. On the way there, he trips over his own suitcase, beat up and fraying and just big enough to hold every material possession Quackity cares about enough to lug around with him. He gives the damn thing a kick, hurrying it on its way to an early grave. He stubs his toe against a roller wheel he hadn't seen.

The grumbling is no longer under his breath, and a lot more colorful now.

When he finally makes it into the kitchen, Sapnap is leaning against the counter with one eyebrow raised, coffee mug in hand.

"You still suck at waking up," he comments.

"Shut the fuck up," Quackity grouses. He gestures at Sapnap's mug. "Give me that."

With a roll of his eyes, Sapnap hands the mug over and immediately turns to start making a new cup. Quackity wraps his fingers around the warm ceramic.

"Gross, this has your germs in it," he says. Sapnap heaves an exasperated sigh, but Quackity takes a sip before he can say anything.

The coffee burns his tongue.

"Jesus *fucking christ*," he hisses, slamming the mug down on the table. "That's fucking hot!"

"I sure am," Sapnap says easily, and Quackity wants to throw something at him. "It's coffee, dumbass, of course it's hot."

Quackity drops into a chair and slumps down against the kitchen table, hiding his face in his arms. He's still so tired and the bright light pouring through the kitchen windows isn't helping his headache at all. So he closes his eyes against his forearms, waiting in darkened peace while the coffee beside him cools enough to safely drink. "I hate you."

"Really?" There's the sound of liquid pouring as Sapnap makes himself a new cup of coffee. "S'that why you hitchhiked two hours to show up broke as shit on my doorstep?"

Quackity raises his head to stare balefully at Sapnap. His friend meets his eyes and holds the gaze. It's as if he's daring him to argue.

And, well, Quackity has never been one to turn down a dare.

"I'm not completely broke," Quackity says. In response, Sapnap lets out another sigh and takes the seat across from him.

"You don't have to keep doing this," he says. "We don't have to be your absolute last resort. You know that, right? That you can come back before you're out of options?"

It's too early for this conversation. Quackity's had exactly one sip of coffee. His head still feels sleep-fuzzy and his neck aches from the shitty couch.

“I know,” Quackity says.

“Do you?” Sarnap presses. “Because this is the third time it’s happened, Quackity, and you know I love you and I’m happy to help you any time you need it, but it seems like every time you get back up on your feet, you just disappear until you need us again.”

Quackity flinches.

“I’m not saying to stop coming back.” His voice softens, oh-so-gentle, and Quackity’s insides squirm. “I just want you to come back *before* it gets to this.”

He gestures to Quackity and the vague space behind him; the shirt that he’s been wearing for the last three days, the shitty couch, the ragged suitcase that’s seen Quackity through three apartments, two schools, four break-ups, and more jobs than he really wants to acknowledge.

“Right,” Quackity mumbles. “Got it.”

Part of him wants to pack his things back into that suitcase and get out now. Sarnap’s right that it’s not fair to him, to Karl, to everyone else he keeps burdening when he does this. But another part of him, the part he doesn’t understand and the part that always wins, thinks bitterly that he *doesn’t get it*. That he’ll never get it.

Sarnap hasn’t felt the gaping hole that opens up in Quackity’s chest every time he steps foot in this god-awful town. He doesn’t know the restlessness that infects his brain, his limbs, every part of him, when he’s not here. Quackity is cursed to hate his home and to never feel at ease when he’s away from it.

The times he’s tried to explain it to anyone, he’s met with responses about *trauma* and *anxiety* and *self-destructive behaviors*. And the thing is, he’s *tried* going about it that way. He’s been to therapists and counselors. He’s talked. He’s walked over every inch of the shit he remembers, and the restlessness and the ache never went away.

So he’s decided he’s cursed. He’s just cursed.

Sarnap’s still looking at Quackity. Quackity picks at a flake of dried food on the kitchen table and avoids looking back.

“Karl’s coming over soon,” Sarnap finally says, offering a subject change as if it’s a peace offering. Quackity accepts it gratefully.

“This early?”

“Q, it’s noon.”

Quackity squints at the oven clock behind Sarnap’s back. He’s right. Huh. “All right. I’ll get out of your hair before he’s here.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Sarnap says. “I’m sure he’d be happy to see you.”

“Nah, nah I get it,” Quackity says lightheartedly, raising his hands and getting to his feet. “Don’t want to interrupt you two lovebirds. It’s fine. Don’t even worry about your ol’ pal Big Q.”

Sapnap shakes his head. “You’re so dumb. I see him every day. You can stay.”

“Nope,” Quackity says, exaggerating the p sound. “What you don’t know is that I *also* have a hot date this afternoon.”

Sapnap raises one eyebrow.

“I am going to walk down to the grocery store and buy junk food with the last of my cash,” Quackity says.

Sapnap continues to fix him with the same look.

“...I’m also going to ask if they’re hiring.”

After Sapnap makes breakfast (if it still counts as breakfast closer to one in the afternoon), Quackity takes the time to shower and change his shirt. He borrows a hoodie from Sapnap while he washes his own clothes. They were all pretty overdue for it.

When he steps outside of the bathroom with still-damp hair, the sound of Karl’s loud, infectious laughter greets him from the kitchen. Quackity takes a deep breath and steels himself, and he walks in.

Instantly, Karl turns his beaming grin on him. Sunlight from the kitchen window behind him catches the edges of his light brown hair, turning the strands golden. It’s like he’s glowing. “Quackity! It’s so good to see you!”

“Hey Karl,” Quackity says, and before he’s even got the whole sentence out, Karl’s crossed the kitchen to wrap him up in the clingiest hug imaginable. Quackity laughs, wrapping his arms around Karl’s back in return. “All right, all right, hi. Jeez, missed you too.”

There’s a hole in Quackity’s chest, but it’s a little less gaping when he’s in Karl’s arms like this. It’s warmer, gentler, a little more manageable. It’s the time the three of them were seventeen and fell asleep all in one big pile, and Karl clung to him the whole night. It’s a warm and borrowed hoodie and a safe place to sleep.

If it’s the dying embers of a teenage crush too, then so be it.

“How’ve you been?” Quackity asks before Karl can ask the same of him.

“Good!” Karl takes a step back and clasps his hands together. “Did Sapnap tell you we went to look at an apartment together last week?”

There’s no reason for that to feel like a punch to Quackity’s gut, but it does all the same. He pastes on a smile. “No, he didn’t, he’s keeping secrets. Are you guys moving?”

“No,” Sapnap says, at the same time Karl says, “Maybe!”

“Nothing’s set in stone,” Sapnap says. “It wouldn’t be until the spring anyway.”

“It has a *yard*, ” Karl says, “So we could have a dog. And there’s two bedrooms, so you could come and stay whenever you wanted.”

They’d joked once about moving in together, all three of them, and he’d seriously considered it then. But that was back in high school before Quackity’s curse started.

“Hell yeah,” he says. “Is it near here?”

“Nah,” Sapnap says. “We’re getting out.”

*Getting out.* The phrase bounces around in his head. It’s something they’ve all said before, this wanting to “get out.” To escape this town before it sucks all the life out of them.

He’d figured Sapnap and Karl would leave sooner rather than later. Maybe this town isn’t the most homophobic place, and maybe the two of them can even hold hands in public most of the time without getting too much shit for it. But it’s still a small town, and the kind of small town with three churches to one grocery store.

So he doesn’t blame them. They’re getting out. They’ll be happier the farther from this place they end up. And they’ll be much happier if Quackity doesn’t stick around to drag them back.

“All right, well.” He raises a hand in a wave, skirting around the kitchen to the front door. “If you guys don’t mind, I’ve got a hot date with Dollar General calling me, so I’ll leave you two in peace.”

“Bye Quackity!” Karl waves in return, and Sapnap calls, “You still don’t have to leave if you don’t want to.”

“*Bye!*” Quackity says a little more forcefully, and he lets himself out.

He loves Karl and Sapnap both. He really does. If things were any different, he’s pretty sure he’d still move in with them in a heartbeat.

But there’s a hole in his chest, and someday, it’s going to swallow Quackity whole. The last thing he wants is for it to drag them in too.

In this small of a town, Quackity was expecting he’d run into at least one person he knows. There’s one grocery store in town - if you can even count *Dollar General* as a grocery store - and everyone does their shopping here, unless they’ve got the time and money to add an extra hour to their shopping trips. It’s inevitable that he’s going to see someone he at least vaguely recognizes.

He just wasn’t expecting his luck to be *this* bad.

Artificial light glares down on him as he stands in the middle of an aisle, holding a plastic basket in one hand and a bag of chips in the other while he tries to do math in his head. There's a crumpled ten dollar bill in his pocket and not much else. This shouldn't put him over that, he's pretty sure.

While he's lost in thought, he hears a voice and footsteps as someone else enters the aisle. He moves to the side without looking up, giving them room to get past him with a muttered, "Excuse me."

"Quackity?"

His breath freezes in his throat.

If he had to narrow down everyone in this town and pick out the two people he most strongly does not want to see in the chips and candy aisle at the dollar general, these are the two he would pick.

This is *just* his luck.

Wilbur has this surprised half-smile on his face with one hand raised into a wave. In direct contrast, Tubbo stares with undisguised horror.

Quackity can't even fault him. At least it's an honest reaction, which is more than Wilbur's got.

"Wilbur," Quackity finally says, finding his voice, and he forces a smile of his own. "Holy shit, man, it's been ages! I had no idea you were back."

"I didn't know you were back in town either," Wilbur says. Behind him, Tubbo turns and becomes very interested in the variety of Oreos on the shelf. "I only just got in like two hours ago."

"And you're already running errands?" Quackity jokes, trying to keep their conversation light. If he can do that, he thinks he can get out of here before anything deeper comes up, or the dreaded '*How have you been?*' gets asked.

Wilbur shrugs. "We needed some easy food in the house. Everyone's too busy to cook."

"Same," Quackity says, gesturing to the junk food in his basket. "Except I'm not busy, just lazy."

Wilbur laughs at that. The chip bag is still in Quackity's hand, and unless it's changed in the last three years, these are Tubbo's favorite. He drops the bag into Wilbur's basket.

Tubbo's watching out of the corner of his eye. A flash of something crosses the boy's face, and then he turns to face Quackity.

There's a long uncomfortable moment where they both hold each other's gaze. Quackity doesn't really know what he's feeling, but he knows the ache in his chest isn't made any easier with Tubbo's piercing stare. He doesn't seem angry, at least. It's more like he's trying

to analyze Quackity, read him inside and out, which is arguably more uncomfortable than if he'd just been angry.

Wilbur clears his throat. He's uncomfortable too, apparently. "Well," he says. "We should probably—"

"Tommy's gone," Tubbo says.

The hole in Quackity's chest is empty. It aches.

"What?"

"He's missing," Tubbo says. "He disappeared. He's gone."

Quackity stares. "He... What? When?"

"Last night," Wilbur says quietly. "He went on a walk and didn't come back."

Last night. Quackity was here last night. He'd almost gone on a walk himself, while Sapnap was at work and the ache in his chest had felt like too much to handle alone. He could've gone outside. He was there.

The gaping pit inside of it feels like it's large enough for him to fall into. God. This is exactly why he doesn't come back here. This is...

Tubbo and Wilbur are still standing in front of him. He tries to remember how to speak.

"Shit," Quackity says. "Do you—Do you need help? I can help look for him, or... or if there's anything else..."

Wilbur gives him a sad smile. "Thanks, Q. I'll let you know. I think Dad wants to put together a search party, so if you wanted to help with that..."

The idea of searching the woods sits heavy in his empty chest. It's been three years, and it still makes his hands shake. Wilbur has to feel the same way. "Yeah, of course. I, uh, don't have a phone right now but I'm staying with Sapnap, so if you need me, just... you know. Get ahold of him."

Wilbur nods. "Got it. Thanks, Quackity."

"Of course." He looks between Wilbur and Tubbo. "I'll see you guys around, then."

It's an awkward goodbye. Quackity makes a dash for the front of the store, checking out and paying with that crumpled ten dollar bill. He pockets the change and the receipt. His head spins.

*Tommy's missing?*

Why *Tommy*? Out of everyone here—why would it be Tommy who fucking vanishes into thin air?



This town is as cursed as Quackity is. Everyone here is sentenced to a miserable existence in a town the size of a speck, an accidental drop of ink on a map, and in twenty years, thirty years, forty years, no one will even remember its name. That's what he'd always figured - it'll take one more generation before the whole place fucking kicks it. None of the kids want to stay. George and Dream, the lucky ones, are already out. Wilbur could've been out, except he's back again. Quackity wonders if he's stuck here now, or if he'll be gone again too. Karl and Sapnap will be next, he guesses. Maybe Quackity with them. Maybe not. He doesn't know.

Wilbur was so eager to get out. The last conversation they'd had, the last *real* one, Wilbur couldn't fucking wait to get to college. He said he wasn't ever going to move back, no matter what, and Quackity had echoed the statement right back.

See how well that turned out for them.

He hates this place. *He hates this fucking town.*

The memories suck, sure. There's memories wrapped up in every crack in the sidewalk he'd skipped over as a child, and in the grubby playground he'd broken his arm on, and the alley behind the high school where he'd gotten the scar that still splits his eyebrow. He still knows every street like the back of his hand, knows where everyone lives, where everyone used to live. If he let them, he knows his feet could blindly take him to a boarded up house on the end of a street, where the backyard met the woods and the inside met hell. He wonders if it's still boarded up. He wonders if anyone will ever live there again.

It's not just the memories that make him hate this place.

It hits him again. Tommy's gone.

He hasn't seen the kid in years. Last time he saw him, he was fifteen, a messy haired brace-faced terror just hitting growth spurts and turning into all limbs and nothing else.

Tommy had called him a bitch that day, if he remembers correctly. Something to do with Tubbo. Quackity doesn't really remember it anymore. He doesn't care to do the digging into his memory to drag it all out again anyway, so he leaves it be.

He leaves his memories be, and his chest feels hollow and his head feels like it's spinning as something crawls under his skin. The usual feeling.

He's walked the wrong direction. Sapnap's apartment is the other way, but suddenly Quackity finds himself standing on the corner of a familiar street on the wrong side of town. Across the street is that playground that Quackity could swear hasn't been cleaned since he was a kid.

The woods are ahead of him.

He's still holding the plastic shopping bag, wind tearing at it and crinkling the plastic. It tugs at his hair, the beanie he wears over it, the hem of Sapnap's hoodie.

His ears are ringing. His head is fuzzy.

The woods are in front of him.

He could keep walking. He could walk into the woods for the first time in three years. Wilbur had said they were putting together a search party, hadn't he? He could get an early start.

Tommy could be in there. He could be hurt. He could be alone and afraid. He could be...

Quackity is suddenly aware of his own pounding heartbeat. It's loud in his ears. It's the only thing in his ears. It's the only thing he's aware of.

*Tommy is dead*, an ugly, ugly voice in his mind says. He could be in the woods and dead and no one will find his body because it is buried so deep. There are roots growing around him and through him, there is dirt and bugs above and around him, he is decaying and no one will ever even find his bones.

*It is already too late*, says the empty ache in his chest. Tommy is dead, Tommy is gone, they will never, ever find him.

Quackity throws up behind the playground he broke his arm on when he was nine years old.

When he makes it back to Sapnap's apartment, he doesn't remember how he got there.

## Chapter End Notes

as always comments are my life source, if you leave one i will love you til my dying day and also write more for a sooner update! tell me if you liked it, if you hate me (/lh), if you have any theories, whatever! or just leave kudos and lurk that is also very cool. hope you have a wonderful day, lovely reader <3

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

“Someone took him,” Tubbo says, his voice flat. “He’s not lost in the woods somewhere. The search party is dumb.”

Techno doesn't know what to say. He agrees, deep down, with the first thing Tubbo said. There's no easy explanation for why his phone was there with no other sign of him.

He doesn't know how to voice that agreement, though, because there's something awful in his head and sick in his stomach that he can't say aloud to Tubbo.

That the search party isn't useless, even if Tommy didn't get lost there.

That the woods are a good place to dump a body.

## Chapter Notes

helloo everyone! we're back with this week's update. as always, general heads-up for dark themes and unsettling vibes, but i don't think i have any specific content warnings for this chapter.

big big thank you to 1) dylanapollo for beta reading this fic (this chapter in particular is much better thanks to them!) and ALSO 2) to the dsmp retirement home discord server. u guys are literally the sweetest and most supportive ty for all the nice things you've said about this fic <333

AND OF COURSE thank u to all the lovely commenters, you guys give me so much motivation to keep writing!!! appreciate you all so much!

hope you enjoy the chapter! :3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next couple of days drag by in a hazy sort of blur. Time feels broken, as if Tommy's absence has opened up a rift within the passage of time, and now it's lazily drifting away. It's lost all meaning.

Or maybe it's just Techno who's lost it.

He still hasn't slept. He's dozed off for a few minutes here and there, head down on the table, but that's about it. Once or twice, he's actually tried going to bed, lying still and staring up at the ceiling until his mind spins itself into nausea. That's when he gives up and gets out of bed to do *something*. Anything to get his mind off of replayed memories.

He and Phil spend all of one afternoon and most of the night following combing the woods with a few other people in town. Tubbo stayed home from that one, and Wilbur with him so he wasn't alone. Some people had already been out all day too. That's the one nice thing about how small this town is. Word travels fast and everyone knows everyone. Everyone who knows Tommy, everyone who knows Phil, had turned out to help look.

Not that it mattered, because they haven't found so much as a trace of him. The only lead they have is still his broken phone, left on the edge of the sidewalk in front of their house.

Tubbo has been so, so quiet since Tommy disappeared, but Thursday afternoon, he'd sat down beside Techno on the couch and looked him in the eyes.

"Someone took him," Tubbo said, his voice flat. "He's not lost in the woods somewhere. The search party is dumb."

Techno didn't know what to say. He agreed, deep down, with the first thing Tubbo said. There's no easy explanation for why his phone was there with no other sign of him.

He didn't know how to voice that agreement, though, because there's something awful in his head and sick in his stomach that he can't say aloud to Tubbo. That the search party isn't useless, even if Tommy didn't get lost there. That the woods are a good place to dump a body.

He wanted to throw up the second he thought it. He can't stop thinking it any time after, when he's walking through the woods at Phil's side with a flashlight in hand, when he's lying sleepless in bed, when he's sitting at the kitchen table, formatting a poster with Tommy's face on it.

He's stared at the word "MISSING" in big bold letters at the top of the poster for so long that it barely means anything to him anymore. Harder is writing out dry descriptors of his brother - *seventeen, blonde hair, blue eyes, 6'2", last seen—*

Last seen in an oversized t-shirt and striped pyjama pants, standing in his own bedroom with his hands thrown wide in frustration. Last seen alive and okay, arguing with two brothers who didn't keep him from leaving.

He finishes the poster as the sun comes up. He and Wilbur drive out to get copies printed and hung up.

Or more accurately, Wilbur drives. Techno goes to get in the driver's seat, but Wilbur steps between him and the car.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" he asks.

Techno blinks, once, twice. "I had to make the poster."

Wilbur holds out his hand. "I'm driving."

"I'm fine," Techno says. He doesn't feel much worse than the baseline of *awful* he's felt since Wednesday night. He's pulled a few sleepless nights in a row before, anyway, and he's

already had two cups of coffee this morning. He knows how to handle this.

“No offense, but you look like you’re about to pass out on your feet.” Wilbur’s hand stays outstretched between them. “Keys.”

He wants to argue. Some stubborn little part of him, frustrated because he *needs to do something*, he needs to be useful right now. He could just dig his heels in and refuse to hand the keys over.

Wilbur is stubborn too, though. It’s a family trait.

He hands him the keys.

Techno becomes desensitized to looking at his little brother’s face around the twentieth poster. He’s got a stapler in one hand and a poster in the other, and it no longer sends a sting through his heart to see Tommy smiling back at him from the paper. It’s just a process now; paper against telephone pole or bulletin board, two clicks of the stapler against paper, move on to the next one.

Early October wind, crisp and biting, whips around him, tugging on the ends of Techno’s hair and pulling it loose from his ponytail. It makes it a challenge to keep the posters still while he staples.

Wilbur’s just behind him, handing him sheets of paper to staple. They work in silence, occasionally trading words of “*Can you hand me that*” or “*We should put one there,*” but besides that, they keep any conversation to a minimum.

It feels uncomfortable, to be so quiet beside the person he used to know best.

A point to Wilbur’s favor is that he’s at least not trying to force pointless conversation today. He actually hasn’t said much at all since Techno snapped at him in the car yesterday. Techno still doesn’t know if he should apologize for that.

They’ve been out for an hour and are nearly out of posters when Wilbur finally speaks.

“This still doesn’t feel real.”

Techno staples a poster with two clicks of the stapler. He glanced over his shoulder at Wilbur, but his brother isn’t looking back at him even as he hands over another poster on autopilot.

“I keep thinking I’m gonna wake up in my dorm room. Like I’m not really here. I don’t think it’s sunk in at all.”

Techno takes the offered sheet of paper, moving down the street to another telephone pole. He can’t relate to the feeling Wilbur describes; this has felt all too real for him since the moment he realized Tommy hadn’t come home.

But Wilbur is talking sincerely. He's acknowledging the situation, and Techno could hug him for it.

Not that he knows how to respond to it at all. Techno doesn't do conversations like this. Their whole family knows it; if you want to talk feelings and leave feeling better, you go to Phil, or once upon a time, to Wilbur. If you want to talk feelings and get one word replies or grunts as response, then you go to Techno.

Wilbur knows this, of course. He knows everything about Techno, or he did, once. So he seems unbothered by Techno's silence, and he keeps going.

"It feels awful to say, but I feel like this isn't affecting me like it should be. I feel like I could just text Tommy and get a reply, like it's no different than how it used to be. The only difference is that he's not... he's not gonna answer."

Techno staples the next poster more sharply than he needs to. "You and Tommy texted a lot, then?"

"A little." Wilbur hands him another paper. "He texted me more than I texted him. I'm... I've been a shit brother to him. I've had enough time thinking about it to know that."

There's an uncomfortable curl in Techno's stomach at that. *Just to Tommy?*

"He talked about you a bunch," Techno says. "Still looked up to you, even if you didn't text him back enough." Wilbur flinches at that. "You know he took music this year just so he could learn guitar? Didn't need to for his credits or anything, but he did anyway. He tried to take after you."

Wilbur's quiet. Techno staples another poster. Tommy smiles back at him from the paper.

"He was going to surprise you with it," Techno says. "Whenever you came to visit."

When Wilbur finally speaks, his voice has a wobbly edge to it. "You're using past tense."

That sick to his stomach feeling is still there, and it curls a little tighter. He hadn't even realized.

"He—" Techno's voice falters, and the words sound fake to his own ears as he corrects them, "—he *does* take after you. *Is* learning guitar."

Wilbur sucks in a shaky breath. He hands Techno another poster.

Tommy keeps smiling back at them.

---

“I’m walking down to McDonalds,” Tubbo announces, stuffing three posters into the backpack thrown over his shoulder. At the kitchen table, Phil has a mug of coffee even though it’s the middle of the afternoon, and his phone in his hand. Techno’s there too, eating chips and typing on his laptop. He blinks at Tubbo expressionlessly behind his glasses. After a moment, he gets to his feet, swallowing down a mouthful of chips and closing the lid of his laptop.

“I’ll walk with you.” Techno brushes his hands off on his jeans, starting to step around the table. Tubbo cuts him off.

“I’m going on my own.”

Techno stares at him hesitantly, glancing at Phil as if for back-up. For a moment, Phil just looks back, something unreadable and reserved about his expression.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Phil says. “Techno can walk with you.”

Frustration builds in Tubbo’s chest. “It’s broad daylight. I’ve walked there and back a hundred times before, and there’s never been a single problem with it on any of them.”

“I know,” Phil says calmly. “But it’s different now. We don’t know what kind of danger—”

“*Why?*” Tubbo knows why. He gets why Phil’s being like this, why Techno’s been like this too, why nobody lets him out of their fucking sight, but it’s getting *stifling*. “I’m seventeen, Phil! You can’t keep me locked up here forever!”

“We’re not—” Techno starts, but he’s cut off. Phil’s eyes are narrowed.

“I’m not keeping you locked up, Tubbo. I’m trying to keep you *safe*. I’m sorry that it’s inconvenient for you, but—”

“Oh, right, gotta protect me from the dangers of *McDonalds*, ” Tubbo says, dripping sarcasm. “Those shitty burgers and greasy fries, never know when they might attack!”

Phil snaps. His fist hits the table, sudden and startling but not loud, and his voice rises. “Someone is out there *taking kids* and I’m not *fucking* going to let it happen to another of mine!”

Silence falls over the kitchen. Anxiety races through Tubbo, electricity in every vein. Techno’s gone silent and still too, staring at Phil with wide-eyed surprise. The kitchen door behind Tubbo is incredibly tempting. He could just bolt, just run and go before either of them recover...

Instantly, Phil’s face falls. The fist is gone, replaced by a hand flat on the table instead. His face crumples into an apology, guilt written clearly all over it.

“I’m sorry,” he says. He hadn’t been yelling before, not even close, but his tone is noticeably gentler now. “I didn’t mean to get upset like that. Tubbo, I’m just... I’m worried.”

Tubbo just looks at him.

“I think,” Techno says hesitantly, glancing back at Tubbo, “If he wants to go by himself, it’s probably okay.”

There’s a look on Techno’s face like he instantly regrets saying it, but Tubbo could hug him.

Phil, still looking guilty, slumps in his chair. “Okay. Just be home before dark, all right?”

“I know,” Tubbo says. “I’m not stupid.”

Phil doesn’t say anything else. Tubbo doesn’t wait around for another reply, out the door before either of them change their minds, or Techno decides to follow and keep an eye on him from a block behind, or something.

When Tubbo steps outside, it’s the first time he’s been left to his own devices since Wednesday night. Which, like, it had sucked to be left alone in the car Wednesday night, yeah. It had sucked a lot. But it also kinda sucks that both Techno and Phil’s way of making up for it is to hover over him or make sure Wilbur is doing it for them. Wilbur being around is awkward enough already. Wilbur being around and acting like Tubbo’s babysitter is a hundred times worse.

So when Tubbo draws in a breath of cold crisp air on the sidewalk all alone, it feels like relief. He kicks a rock on the sidewalk, launching it into the road. Slowly, gradually, the electricity living inside of him fades to something a little less electrocuting.

He has a few stops to make on this walk. McDonalds is one of them, but he needs to walk to the library too, and maybe a few other places. He hasn’t decided yet. McDonalds is the closest, though, so he heads there first.

When he gets there, there’s exactly two cars outside. He recognizes one, the beat up junker that Sapnap’s driven for the last four years. The other car is in the drive-through.

Place to himself, then. Nice.

He pushes open the door, with its dirt-smudged windows and ratty doormat. The whole place needs to be cleaned, *badly*. He doesn’t know how it passed health inspection. There’s a faded and curled print-out on the bulletin board just inside the door that proclaims it *did* pass, somehow, but Tubbo questions the validity of it sometimes.

Behind the counter, Sapnap leans against a piece of machinery, eating an apple pie out of a box.

“Hey Tubbo,” he says around a mouthful of apple, raising a hand in a wave. His uniform-issue visor cap is pushed back on his head, dark hair sticking up in every direction except for the tiny amount that’s stayed gathered into a loose ponytail at his neck.

“Hey Sapnap,” Tubbo replies, making his way to the counter. “How’s it going?”

“Same old, same old,” Sapnap says. “Still working in this shitty place.”

“Shame they haven’t fired you yet,” Tubbo says. Sapnap laughs like it’s a joke.



“Oh, Tubbo,” he says, his voice patronizing. “Poor, sweet, innocent Tubbo. They can’t *afford* to fire me.”

Tubbo raises an eyebrow.

“You’ll see,” Sapnap says. “When you work here, you’ll get it. They’re *desperate* for employees. I’m doing them a huge favor by working as often as I do, they’d never survive without me.”

“I’m not working here,” Tubbo says. “Ever. I do want a cheeseburger, though.”

Sapnap drops the apple pie box he’s been holding into the garbage. “You’ll come around. It’s a rite of passage. Even Techno worked here.”

“For like, two weeks,” Tubbo says. “Can you at least wash your hands before making that?”

“I can guarantee you, any germs on my hands are already on your burger.” Sapnap washes his hands.

Tubbo rolls his eyes. Behind him, the door swings open. Tubbo glances over his shoulder and is mildly surprised to see someone he doesn’t recognize in the slightest.

He’s extremely tall, but also looks like if Tubbo sneezed on him, he might die instantly. There’s a mask over the entire lower half of his face, and overgrown hair down to his shoulders.

“Uh,” the person says, and wow, his voice is much deeper than Tubbo was expecting. “Hi. Um—”

“Hi welcome to McDonalds,” Sapnap says loudly, his tone as bland as it could possibly be. “I’ll be with you in a sec.”

“Okay,” he says, and then moves to stand a few feet behind Tubbo, hands clasped awkwardly. Tubbo eyes him a few moments longer.

“I don’t know you,” Tubbo says.

He blinks. “Oh. Yeah, I don’t know you either.”

“Pretty weird,” Tubbo says. “I know almost everyone in this town.”

“Uhh. I don’t go outside much.”

Tubbo’s eyes narrow. “Pretty weird.”

The person rubs his neck uncomfortably. Sapnap heaves a sigh.

“Tubbo, stop antagonizing my customers.” He drops Tubbo’s cheeseburger onto a tray along with a thing of fries and an empty cup. “Get your food and get out of line.”

“Jeez. I’m trying to make conversation, man.” He grabs the tray off the counter and backs out of the line, gesturing for the new guy to move ahead of him.

Tubbo stands at the soda fountain, deciding on a drink while snacking on the French fries on his tray. He can hear the rambling order behind him, and he can feel Sapnap’s growing confusion.

“Can I have... Uh, what’s that called? There, up on the...the sign thingy.”

“The... chicken nuggets?”

“It’s chicken?”

Tubbo nearly spits out a French fry. He can’t help turning around to watch this. Sapnap looks absolutely bewildered.

“Yeah, man. They’re chicken nuggets. Every McDonalds sells them.”

“Oh. Okay, I have, um...” He digs around in his pockets, eventually fishing out a bill, and he honest to God says the next bit as if it’s a question. “This is five dollars...”

Sapnap just stares. “...Yeah?”

“Boss man,” Tubbo says, interrupting. “Have you never been to a McDonalds before?”

The new guy turns to look at him. “Uh... I don’t go outside much.”

“Holy shit,” Tubbo says under his breath, and then louder, “Okay, hold on.” He walks back over again, setting his tray back on the counter and pointing up at the menu. “So those are the things that are for sale here. The numbers are how much they cost. This is five dollars, which means whatever you get has to be less than five dollars or you won’t be able to pay for it, unless Sapnap likes you enough to steal for you.”

“I know that,” the guy says, sounding mildly offended at how dumbed down Tubbo’s explanation had been. Tubbo could laugh.

“Dude,” Sapnap says. “Do you really not know how any of this works?”

“I know how it works!” he says defensively. “I’ve bought things before. I just forgot the word. I’ll get the chicken nuggets.”

“Four or six piece?” Sapnap says.

His eyes are blank. “Which ones are five dollars?”

“Both,” Sapnap says. “It’s like, a dollar different.”

“If you get the four piece you could also get a drink,” Tubbo suggests. “Unless you want the one with more food.”

“Six piece,” he says decisively. Sapnap taps the cash register and takes the money. As he disappears into the back to get the food, Tubbo studies the new person again.

His shirt sleeves are uneven, and one set of shoelaces are untied. Tubbo can’t see most of his face because of the mask and the way his hair falls in front of it, but he doesn’t recognize anything about him. Not even a resemblance to someone he might know.

It feels really odd to have no idea who this guy is.

“I’m Tubbo,” he blurts out.

He blinks. “Okay. I’m Ranboo.”

“Cool,” Tubbo says. “Are you sure you’re not new in town or something?”

“Pretty sure,” Ranboo says. “Last I checked, anyway.”

Tubbo’s trying to figure out how to take that - is it a joke? Is he just really bad at jokes? Maybe that’s what all of this is - when Sapnap comes back.

“Nuggets,” Sapnap interrupts, dropping a box on the counter. “And your change.”

“Thank you,” Ranboo says. He pockets the change and then picks up the box of chicken nuggets. “Um, well. It was nice to meet you, Tubbo—”

“Hold up,” Tubbo says before he can finish the sentence. “Are you graduated already? I swear I’ve never seen you in school before, and I’d definitely remember if I had.”

“Oh,” Ranboo says. “Uh, no. I’m—I’m homeschooled.”

“And you don’t go outside much,” Tubbo says. Ranboo nods.

“That,” he agrees.

There’s something weird to Tubbo about that. That there’s been a whole entire person in the same tiny town as him, this entire time, and Tubbo never even saw him. That there’s been a house somewhere on this street with people inside, with Ranboo inside, and Tubbo might have walked right past it a hundred times without even knowing. The feeling sits uncomfortable and melancholic in his stomach.

All of a sudden, something flashes into his memory and he slams his drink down on the counter.

“Fuck! I forgot. Sorry Ranboo,” he adds, noticing the way he flinches at the loud noise. Tubbo digs through the backpack over his shoulder, pulling out a piece of paper. “Sap, can I hang this on the bulletin board?”

He slides it over, facedown. The posters are a little too much to look at still. As Sapnap picks it up and turns it over, his face falls into something solemn and sad, an instant demeanor change. It’s like the very air of this shitty McDonalds has gotten heavier.

“Yeah, you can,” Sapnap says. “Of course you can, Tubbo. Here.” He hops the counter, one hand down and leaping over the side, and he makes his way to the bulletin board at the door. “There’s too much shit on the thing. Here, these are trash.”

He tears a few posters down and holds them out to Tubbo. Tubbo takes them, muttering something about being used as a trashcan when there’s one three feet away. Sapnap ignores him and tacks up the poster, and Tubbo looks away before he can catch a glimpse of Tommy’s face on it.

“Hey, Ranboo,” Tubbo says. He points blindly behind him at the bulletin board. “You seen him recently by any chance?”

“Who?” Ranboo peers at the board. “Uh, no, sorry I don’t think I have. My memory isn’t very good, but... he doesn’t seem familiar.”

Tubbo shrugs. He hasn’t expected anything, but he feels cold disappointment in his stomach anyway. “Okay. Well, if you see him, there’s the number to call.”

“I, uh, don’t have a phone,” Ranboo admits.

Tubbo stares at him. “You don’t have a phone? At *all*?”

He shakes his head. “But... But if I see him, I can tell someone? I’ll come back here and say something.”

“This is a McDonalds,” Sapnap says. “You’d probably be better off going to the police station or something.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah. I’ll do that then,” Ranboo promises earnestly. It’s a little surprising how much he sounds like he means it. “Is he... Is that one of your friends?”

Sapnap’s quiet. He pats Tubbo’s shoulder as he walks back to the counter.

“That’s my brother,” Tubbo says. He does his best to keep his voice steady. He hasn’t had to talk about this yet and he hadn’t expected to have to do it now. “He’s my best friend.”

“Oh.” Ranboo’s voice is soft. “I’m really sorry.”

He sounds *so* genuine. It’s kind of weird, since they literally just met five minutes ago.

“Thanks,” Tubbo says. He doesn’t know what else to say. Ranboo looks like he doesn’t know either, both hands wrapped around his box of chicken nuggets that have to be getting cold at this point. Much like Tubbo’s own cheeseburger, he realizes.

“Okay, well,” he says finally. “If, you know, you ever want to go outside again, we could hang out. Or something.”

Ranboo perks up. “That would be fun.”

Tubbo's about to pull out his phone and get Ranboo's when he remembers. "Oh. Right. No phone. Okay, uh... not even a house phone or anything?"

Ranboo shifts his weight from foot to foot. "Um... My parents don't really... believe in technology."

"Oh god." Tubbo stares at him. "Your parents are *those* kind of homeschoolers? The ones that don't let their kids do like, fucking anything out of the house or have friends or shit?"

"No!" Ranboo says quickly. "I *can* leave, I'm allowed to have friends. I just... don't. Really."

Tubbo doesn't know if he buys it, so he just eyes Ranboo. "Okay. Meet me back here at McDonalds tomorrow at three, then. I can show you around town, since you might now have seen the cool stuff with all the time you spend not going outside."

"That would be nice," Ranboo says. "Sure. Okay. Tomorrow at three."

"See you then," Tubbo says.

After Ranboo walks out the door, he looks back and gives a little wave over his shoulder. Tubbo waves through the window.

"That guy's fucking *weird*," Sapnap observes.

"You're fucking weird," Tubbo says. Sapnap makes an offended noise.

He eats his now-cold burger quickly before saying goodbye to Sapnap and leaving for the library. He still has work to do today.

---

They search the woods again that night. Not as late this time; Phil insists they head home a couple hours after the sun had set. Techno would've stayed out longer, would've stayed out until the sun came back up again, but. Well. Phil insists. Techno is wobbly on his feet anyway. He needs another cup of coffee.

When they walk through the doorway, Phil peels away to the kitchen, saying something about making them both food. There's a light on in the living room. Techno peeks through the doorway.

Tubbo lies on the couch, asleep with one arm hanging over the edge. There's already a blanket tucked around his shoulders, and no other sign of Wilbur. Probably in bed early too, then. It's been a long day for everyone.

Techno lightly crosses the living room and stands in front of Tubbo for just a moment before kneeling down to lift his little brother easily into his arms. Tubbo shifts in his sleep, eyelids

fluttering and inaudible words mumbled under his breath.

“You’re okay,” Techno says softly. Tubbo’s head flops against his shoulder as he settles back into slumber.

Techno fixes the blanket around him as best as he can, and then straightens up and makes his way upstairs. The door to Tommy and Tubbo’s bedroom is left half-closed. Techno eases it open further with his foot, and then he hesitates.

Tommy’s bed is so, so empty. There’s an emptiness hanging over the whole room because of it.

Techno backs out of the room and walks to his own instead. Gently, he tucks Tubbo into his bed. Someone might as well get some use from it tonight.

He smooths Tubbo’s unruly brown hair away from his eyes. Tubbo mumbles something again, curling onto his side as he settles into sleep. Techno backs out of the room, quietly closing the door until it’s just cracked open, and then he goes back downstairs.

His feet are dragging and heavy as he walks down the stairs, and his eyelids are too. He really needs that coffee, but Phil is still in the kitchen and will *definitely* have something to say if he sees him brewing a pot this late at night.

He slumps down onto the couch and lets his head rest against the back, closing his eyes for just a moment. He really, really doesn’t want to sleep, but he’s dragging. This is gonna become a losing battle at some point very soon.

Footsteps come to a stop just beside him. He feels a kiss pressed lightly to the top of his head, and then the quiet clink of a plate set in front of him on the coffee table. It’s a warm, familiar gesture.

Techno forces his eyes open and sits up, murmuring a thank you as he reaches for the plate, warm from the microwave.

“Get some sleep after you eat,” his father says. “You look dead on your feet.”

Techno blows on a forkful of leftover lasagna to cool it enough to take a bit. He thinks the meal’s from a neighbor who brought it over at some point today. “Tubbo’s in my bed.”

Phil hums. “How’d he get there?”

Techno conveniently has his mouth too full to answer.

“Rest on the couch, then.” Phil places a hand on his shoulder. “I can’t force you to sleep if you won’t, but just rest a little. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Phil,” Techno says. “You don’t have to worry.”

“I do anyway.” He squeezes Techno’s shoulder and then lets go. “I’ll see you in the morning, mate.”

“Night,” Techno says around another forkful of lasagna.

He rests on the couch as best as he can. Every time his eyes are closed long enough for sleep to start grabbing hold of him, he sees Tommy behind them, striped pyjama pants and hurt-crumpled face. He could swear he hears him, every now and then, just out of range for Techno to understand the words he’s saying. He just hears his voice.

Every time he opens his eyes, there is darkness and silence instead.

It’s another sleepless night. This time, he doesn’t know what to do to pass the time.

“You need to sleep,” Phil tells Techno the next morning, after he watches Techno nearly pour milk into a cereal box instead of a bowl. Tubbo’s sitting at the kitchen table, looking amused.

“I’ve been—”

“Go to bed,” Phil says more insistently. “The only thing you’re doing today is resting. You haven’t slept in days.”

Techno wants to argue, because there’s so much he should be doing today. There’s a list of places he wants to drive out to and look around, hang up some more posters, and... anything else he can think of to do. Around noon, Wilbur announced he wants to put up posters too. Techno reaches for his keys, hanging up on the fridge, but Phil beats him to it.

“Six hours,” Phil says. “Six consecutive hours of sleep before you get these back.”

Which is probably fair. He’s at the point of sleep deprivation where his vision is fucked.

“*Go to bed,*” Phil tells him, pocketing the keys. Techno makes an unhappy noise, trying to arrange his words well enough to convince his father he doesn’t need to, even as the kitchen around him swims blurrily.

Instead of arguing, what comes out of his mouth is a long yawn.

“...Fine,” he concedes, if for no other reason than it’ll get his father to stop giving him that eyebrow-raised look.

So that’s how he ends up in bed at 3 PM on a Saturday, lying on his side under a pile of blankets and staring blearily at his phone screen.

“*Try turning the phone off,*” he can hear Phil’s voice say in his head. “*Might help you fall asleep faster.*”

The thing is, falling asleep means letting his mind wander. Letting his mind wander means replaying the memory of the last time he saw Tommy. It means thinking and rethinking everything he did wrong in an endless loop.

He stifles another yawn with one hand. Maybe if he keeps himself awake just a little longer, he'll just pass out without any trouble.

That's been his strategy for the past two and half hours. He's been watching random videos on his phone the whole time, scrolling deeper and deeper through the internet until his brain feels like mush for *multiple* reasons.

His strategy isn't working.

A text pops up at the top of his phone screen. Phil.

(3:17) dadza: *Sound off. Where's everyone at?*

(3:17) dadza: *I'm at home in my office.*

(3:18) wilbur: *went to get more posters printed, about an hour from home currently*

(3:20) tubbo: *gettihn pizza w ranboo*

Techno types out his own reply - '*six consecutive hours sleep*' - even though it'll give away that he hasn't been asleep the last couple hours he's been up here.

This is something Phil's started doing. They've got a group chat with the four of them, and every now and then, somebody - usually Phil - asks where they are. Just to check in. Make sure everyone knows where everyone else is, and who they're with.

They're all a little extra paranoid now, Techno guesses.

Speaking of which, he has no idea who Ranboo is. He thought he knew most of Tubbo's friends. Fingers hesitate over the keyboard as he considers asking, and then deletes the message before sending it. He'll ask later.

He turns off his phone and sets it face-down on the dresser beside his bed, rolling over with a grumble and a yawn. He pulls the blankets up over his head, blocking out the afternoon sun seeping through his blinds. Eyes squeezed shut, he lets his mind wander, begging it to stay away from the hell of over-thought memory.

Mercifully, he falls asleep before he can remember.

He's alone.

It's dark, the walls around too close around him, and he is *so alone*. Something winds around his wrists, up his arms, pulling him down. Not roughly; it's more of a coaxing, not commanding. They call him. They're gentle.

He's not alone. They call to him. He is alone. There's no one else there.

It's dark, it's suffocating, it's gentle, it's warm.

It's hard to keep his eyes open. His heart beats loudly in his ears. Every few moments, he feels his mind drift out of his grasp, and he has to fight to pull it back into place.



He can't remember where he is. He can't remember why he's here. Every time he gets close to remembering, his mind drifts away from him again.

He should be panicked. He can feel it in his chest, a few seconds at a time, as he tries to remember. But his heartbeat stays calm, stays steady.

They call him. They stay wrapped around him, coaxing him gently down, down, down.

He's falling.

He isn't falling anymore. He's standing. He's...

He remembers. He's himself, but it's a different self than he was just before, and he's standing outside his house. The sky is dark overhead, even the stars hidden by black clouds, but light spills from the windows behind him.

His brother stands in front of him. Blonde hair, striped pyjama pants, and a face painted red with blood.

When he tries to speak, his words are frozen in his throat. He wants to rush forward, grab onto his brother, hold him here, never ever let him go. His limbs are glued to the ground and to his sides.

All the while, Tommy just stares at him solemnly. His hair is red too now, stained and crimson.

"You haven't found me," he says, but his mouth doesn't move.

*I'm sorry*, he tries to say. He can't move. He can't speak. Guilt, panic, frantic urgency claws at his chest.

"You aren't looking hard enough. I'm right here and you haven't found me."

*I'm sorry*. Tommy's phone is shattered on the ground and there's blood on it. The light is on the kitchen behind him. *I'm trying, I'm looking, I'm so sorry—*

The world is shattering under his feet. His chest shatters along with it, he can't breathe, he can't move, can't speak, everything is falling apart and breaking and Techno can't *breathe move speak—*

Techno crashes out of the dream like a drowning man coming up for air. Gasping, clawing to the surface, mind racing with panic and desperation.

*I'm right here*, Tommy's voice rings in his head. *I'm right here and you still haven't found me.*

Tommy feels close. He *feels so close*.

Dying sunset light spills through his window. Hasn't been six hours. Phil still has his keys.

Techno tears back his blanket, on his feet and surging ahead. He's dizzy. He catches onto his doorframe until the world stops spinning.

Pure instinct drives his footsteps, out the door and down the hall. He pulls down the trapdoor to the attic, climbs up and yanks the pull string of the single lightbulb so hard that it snaps back out of his hand when he lets go.

Boxes and dust stacked under windows. A crawlspace on one side - Techno crouches to his hands and knees to peer in. More dust covers him. The crawlspace is empty.

Back down into the hallway. He fights to put up the ladder, but he can't get it with his hands shaking as badly as they are - *Oh. His hands are shaking. Huh.* He leaves the ladder down.

His bedroom is just as he left it, blanket strewn across the floor and door ajar. Wilbur's door is closed; Techno pushes it open. Empty.

Phil's door is open. His bed is neatly made.

Tubbo and Tommy's door is left half-open. Tommy still has dirty clothes on the floor. Nobody's cleaned them up yet.

Downstairs.

The kitchen is empty. The living room is empty. Phil's office is empty. Techno's home alone.

There's gotta be a message waiting on his phone, he thinks. He left it in his room. He doesn't have time to go back for it.

The basement is dark and empty. Cobwebs hang over utility equipment. Techno scours the place anyway. There's a storage closet with old cleaning supplies and garden maintenance tools. There's a door that leads out to the yard.

Techno leaves that way. Rusty metal hinges creak as he pushes the door open and then lets it slam closed again behind him.

He stands in the middle of the yard. His hands are still shaking. His head feels like it's stuffed full of cotton. His skin prickles like someone's standing behind him where he just can't see them and moving every time he turns.

There's that awful feeling - that Tommy is *here*, that he's just out of Techno's reach and is slipping through his fingers.

There's a porch on the front of their house, and there's space underneath it, a sort of crawlspace at the foundation of the house. One time, a raccoon had gotten stuck underneath it and Tommy crawled in after the thing. He'd had to get stitches for the scratches, but he'd gotten the raccoon out.

Techno had driven him to the emergency room that day. He'd been there for him then.

He's losing it. He's losing Tommy, he's losing his mind. Nothing he does makes sense, and nothing in his head makes sense either. Everything's so jumbled up and messy.

Nobody's home.

He crawls under the porch just to be sure.

He realizes his mistake about thirty seconds after, because it's *dark* down here and he doesn't have his phone. No flashlight. So he's lying here on his stomach with the floor of the porch just over his head, and still can't really see shit.

It's muddy and musty down here, smelling like wet dirt and something mildewy. Part of Techno, the part of him that looks for corpses in the woods, thinks *at least it doesn't smell like rot*.

A bit of light filters through the slats of the porch. There's not much under here. Some rocks, a lot of dirt. A plastic bag that got stuck. Techno can't reach it, so he leaves it be.

Above him, the porch suddenly creaks. Techno freezes, listening to the footsteps above him. Someone's home. He waits to hear the door unlock, but it doesn't. Instead, someone knocks on the door.

*Fuck. Shit.*

Techno wriggles backwards, pushing with his hands. He's gonna be covered in mud by the time he gets out of this. The person on the porch knocks again.

Techno grimaces. "Hold on!"

"Huh?"

Techno crawls out from under the porch and sits up, looking directly at the person standing on the porch. It's their neighbor from down the street, holding a foil-covered plate in one hand and staring at Techno in confusion.

"Hi, Techno," he says, managing to keep his voice casual.

"Hi Bad," Techno says. "Uh. I thought I heard an animal down here. Sometimes they get stuck."

"Ah," Bad says, nodding as if that's a perfectly reasonable explanation. Techno is just grateful he's accepting it. "I thought I'd stop by and bring these over, I was baking today and thought of you guys."

Techno gets to his feet and brushes off his clothes as best as he can. He's a mess.

"Okay," he says stiffly. "Thanks. I can take them."

"Here you are." Bad hands the plate to Techno. It's warm through the foil. "I wanted to mention too, if you guys need anything at all, you let me know, okay? I can only imagine

how hard this is for all of you. If anything happened to Sapnap...”

Techno has absolutely no idea how to carry this conversation. “Yeah.”

Bad doesn’t seem too taken aback by it, though. “I’ll stop back later when your dad’s home, let him know I said hi, all right?”

“Sure,” Techno says. “Thanks Bad.”

Bad reaches out like he’s going to pat Techno’s shoulder, and then looks at the dirt and dust coating him and seems to think better of it. “I’ll see you around. Enjoy the muffins.”

“Thanks,” Techno says again. Bad waves as he steps off the porch, heading back down the street to his house. Techno opens the front door and walks inside.

The panic-fueled adrenaline is wearing off. That prickling feeling over his skin isn’t quite as strong, slowly seeping away and replaced instead by the familiar heaviness in the pit of his stomach. His mind is calming too, no longer racing and wordlessly screaming. It’s back to quiet, tired circles.

Techno sets the plate on the table. There’s a note on top of it he hasn’t noticed before.

*Thinking of your family. Let me know if there’s absolutely anything I can do! - Bad <3*

Tommy’s gone. Everyone is so nice to them now, because Tommy’s gone and they all feel bad about it.

He wants to scream. He wants to throw the plate off the table, punch a wall, kick something until this awful awful pit in his stomach *fucking goes away*.

The feeling is gone. Tommy’s gone. He’s not here. He’s gone and Techno doesn’t know where he is, doesn’t know what’s happened to him, doesn’t know where the last three days have taken his little brother. *He doesn’t know*, he’s helpless and he’s here and no matter what he does he’s not getting any closer to understanding.

He might never see him again.

Techno slumps into a chair, puts his head down on his arms. He wishes he could cry. It’s been three days and he hasn’t been able to cry even once. It’s like all the tears have been taken away from him, replaced by an overwhelmingly numb sort of nausea.

He’s so tired.

## Chapter End Notes



# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

Tubbo and Ranboo sit in the quiet for a while after that, with Tubbo swinging his legs over the side of the pavilion roof and both of them eating their pizza in peace. Sunset light spills over them both, stretching their shadows across the grass and gravel below, out to the playground, complete with rusty swing chains and mildewed plastic slides. Tubbo knew this place before it had become unkept and overgrown. The memories of that time run around in his head.

“You know,” Tubbo says, “I met Tommy on this playground.”

## Chapter Notes

hi hi hi everyone!! another wednesday update for you all!  
this chapter was. weirdly difficult for me to write? i think i'm just struggling with tubbo's pov for some reason, but i think i'm happy with how it came out now and i rly hope you guys like it!!

content warning for some Big dissociation descriptions in this chapter!! take care of yourselves!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sometimes when Quackity wakes up, there's something wrapped around him and dragging him down. It's nothing he can see, nothing he can touch, but it's there. It sits on his chest and wraps heavy around his arms, around his neck. While his mind is still fuzzy with sleep, he gets a glimpse of somewhere he is not.

He lies in the dirt in the middle of the woods, with leaves and roots around him. The thing pulling him down gently coaxes him deeper into the ground, and he doesn't fight it. He lets the forest floor cover him, until it blinds his eyes and seeps into his mouth and his nose, until it fills his lungs with dirt and roots and leaves. He can't breathe, but that's okay, because he doesn't need to anymore. He's not himself now. He's part of the forest, he *is* the forest, and if the forest breathes, it is not with human lungs.

The hole in his chest is finally full.

Quackity opens his eyes on Sapnap's couch.

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Tubbo meets Ranboo outside the McDonalds the next day, as promised. Phil doesn't protest him leaving this time, though Tubbo doesn't know whether it's because he's changed his mind about letting him go out alone, or if his adoptive father just still feels guilty for snapping yesterday, but he'll take it either way.

Ranboo is sitting outside when he gets there, gangly legs folded up on the sidewalk, mask still on over most of his face. He springs to his feet when he sees Tubbo, hand raised in a friendly wave.

"Hi Tubbo," Ranboo says brightly.

"Hi," Tubbo returns. Immediately, he takes a paper out of his pocket, waving it at Ranboo. "I have a plan for today."

"A plan?"

"A plan." Tubbo unfolds the paper. It's just a coupon for the local pizza shop, which had been hanging on their fridge door for the last two weeks. Nobody had used it yet, so it's Tubbo's now. "I'm gonna show you around, and we're gonna get pizza and then eat it on the playground."

"That sounds fun," Ranboo says.

"Awesome," Tubbo says, pocketing the coupon again. "Glad you agree."

"How has your day been?" Ranboo asks, falling into step beside Tubbo.

"Eh." Tubbo shrugs. Ranboo doesn't press the answer. "How's yours?"

"Good," Ranboo says. "I was looking forward to seeing you, so it was a good morning."

Tubbo steals a glance at him when he says that, because he says it a little too easily. It's weirdly genuine, the same sort of honest, open tone he'd been using yesterday too. This guy is either great at lying, or way too sweet and honest for his own good.

The wind picks up as they walk. Ranboo's hair keeps getting blown into his face, no matter how much he fights it to stay tucked behind his ears. Tubbo watches him struggle for a minute, and then digs through his pockets. Techno sheds hair ties everywhere; Tubbo's sure he has one on him.

"Here," he says, handing over the elastic. Ranboo takes it with a grateful, sheepish smile.

"Thanks," he says. "I need a haircut."

"You do," Tubbo agrees, making his voice as disapproving as possible. It's a stupid joke and he doesn't even know what he means by it, but Ranboo laughs anyway.

It's really nice to hear someone laugh. It's been a long few days of serious talk and solemn voices.

During the walk to the pizza shop, Tubbo points out various other buildings as they pass them, and he tells Ranboo something about each place too. He tells Ranboo which street you have to take to get to the schools, and how there's only two of them, so all the ages get split right in half between the two. There's the Dollar General, which is the only thing passing as a grocery store within a thirty minute drive of here. There's the tiny library with weird hours, where Karl works and lets Tubbo print things without asking any questions. Even if those things are lists of the names of every person who lives in this town, and even if Tubbo had to spend the last of his allowance for the printing fee because it was so many more pages than he expected. It's for a good cause, though. That list is still in his backpack with a few lines crossed off.

There's an ice cream shop that's closed for the winter already where Quackity used to take Tubbo on summer afternoons. Techno takes him and Tommy together now. He doesn't say that one aloud to Ranboo.

Ranboo listens as Tubbo rambles through his explanations of each place, and he nods along to all of them.

He's a good listener, Tubbo thinks.

It's all going really well, with Tubbo talking and Ranboo listening and the two of them just walking together. It could almost be a normal day.

So it has to be ruined, of course. And the thing that ruins it is Tubbo catching sight of a poster hanging from a telephone pole on the block ahead of them. He doesn't need to get any closer to know whose photo is printed on it.

Ranboo bumps into him. He didn't realize he'd stopped walking so abruptly.

"Sorry!" Ranboo says, hopping back immediately. "Everything okay?"

Tubbo stares ahead for a moment before he blinks and shakes his head, trying to clear it. He's having a nice day. He's *having an okay day*.

"Yeah, sorry. Just got lost in thought. Uh, let's go this way." He takes a sharp turn. It'll add another ten minutes to the walk to go around this way, but he'll do just about anything to avoid walking past that poster.

He just doesn't want to think about it. So he doesn't. He finds something to change the subject as quickly as he can, before Ranboo asks about it.

"You religious, Ranboo?" Tubbo asks. Ranboo blinks.

"Uh, no," Ranboo says decisively.

"Too bad. There's plenty of places to go if you are. Church," Tubbo says, pointing across the street to a flat, sprawling brick building. He turns his hand and points to a steepled white one



down a few more blocks. "Other church."

"Lots of church," Ranboo comments.

"Plenty of Jesus for everyone," Tubbo agrees. "There used to be a third one a couple years ago, but it's closed now."

"Churches can close?"

"That one can." Tubbo kicks at a rock. He doesn't know why he's telling Ranboo this. It's not a nice thing to talk about. It's not something he likes to think about either. "Building's still there, just empty. Kinda spooky with the stained glass and everything."

Ranboo glances at him. "What happened that made it close down?"

Tubbo just looks back at him. "You don't know? Man, you really don't go outside, do you?"

"Nope." Ranboo fidgets. "Is it something everyone's supposed to know?"

Tubbo shrugs. "I mean, it was the talk of the town when it happened. Nobody would shut up about it. Big, big scandal."

Ranboo doesn't say anything, letting the space open for Tubbo. This is his last chance to back out and make something up.

"The pastor killed his wife," Tubbo says, and he watches Ranboo's eyes widen. Gauges his reaction as if it's a test for Ranboo to pass, and keeps going. "And then he tried to kill two kids too. A whole bunch of people left the church, cuz like, nobody wants to go back after that, you know. The commission tried sending out another pastor but nobody wanted to show up for them either, so they just gave up. And now the building's gonna be empty forever and ever until it falls apart or gets torn down."

"Wow," Ranboo says. "That's terrible."

"Yep." Tubbo hops over a gap between the curb and the street. Ranboo steps over it easily. "This place is messed up."

He says it so easily and lightly. It's too easy to say these things and sound like they don't affect him. He feels a little guilty about how easy it is, sometimes.

At the pizza shop, Tubbo puts in his order. When he turns to Ranboo to ask what he likes on his pizza, the taller boy just shrugs.

"I'm not too hungry," he says. Tubbo frowns.

"We're gonna eat pizza at the playground," Tubbo says. "That's the plan."

"You can still eat pizza," Ranboo says. "I didn't bring money anyway."

Tubbo blinks at him, and then waves the coupon in the air once again. “Ranboo, it’s my treat. You don’t need to worry about it.”

It’s his treat because he gets the pizza for free, but he doesn’t mention that bit. He’s allowed to seem extra generous if he wants to.

After they’ve gotten their pizza, Tubbo leads Ranboo down a few streets further until they turn onto the one with the playground. It’s empty, as always, and as decrepit as the last time Tubbo saw it.

There’s a picnic area here, with wooden tables and benches that haven’t been used in years. Several of the planks are cracked and rotted, and the roof over the little pavilion isn’t a lot better, but Tubbo’s been up here before. It’s sturdy enough to hold his weight, and he thinks the addition of Ranboo won’t make it too much worse.

“Is this safe?” Ranboo asks, standing at the base of the pavilion, pizza box in hand. Tubbo clambers up onto the roof, standing on a picnic table for extra height, and then reaches back down for their food.

“It’s fine,” he says. “I’ve been up here plenty of times before. Hasn’t broken yet.”

Ranboo doesn’t seem entirely convinced, but he pulls himself up after Tubbo anyway, settling awkwardly on the slanted wooden roof. Tubbo flips open the lid of the pizza box and grabs a slice, held carefully in his fingertips because *damn* it’s still hot even after the walk here. The air’s cold, though, so it cools quickly in his hands.

After the first bite, Ranboo’s still just sitting there looking at him. Tubbo raises an eyebrow. “You can eat too, boss man.”

“I know,” Ranboo says. “I’m, uh. I’ll just... take it home. Little hard to eat in public.”

Tubbo blinks at him, at the mask covering his face, and then it clicks into place. There’s a reason he’s wearing that. “Oh. Oh, shit, I wasn’t thinking. Here, hang on.”

Tubbo turns himself around so he’s facing the opposite direction, nearly back to back with Ranboo. He scoots forward a little too just so there’s no chance of him accidentally glancing to the side and seeing something Ranboo doesn’t want him to see.

“There,” he says. “I promise I won’t look, and if I see anyone walk by I’ll give you a heads up so you can put the mask back on.”

Ranboo’s quiet for a moment, and then Tubbo hears the rustling of fabric. “Okay. Thanks, Tubbo.”

“No problem,” Tubbo says, biting into his pizza again.

They sit in the quiet for a while after that, with Tubbo swinging his legs over the side of the pavilion roof and both of them eating their pizza in peace. Sunset light spills over them both, stretching their shadows across the grass and gravel below, out to the playground, complete with rusty swing chains and mildewed plastic slides.

Tubbo knew this place before it had become unkept and overgrown. The memories of that time run around in his head.

“You know,” Tubbo says, “I met Tommy on this playground.”

Ranboo takes a moment before answering. “...Your brother?”

“Yep.” He flicks a twig off the roof of the pavilion. “We were both seven. I’d just moved here with my biological dad, and I didn’t have any friends at all. At the playground, there were these older kids being dicks to the little kids, you know, typical playground bully type shit, kicking over sandcastles and knocking me off the swings, dumb shit like that. And Tommy came over, all righteous fury and like four feet tall, and started screaming at them til they fucked off.”

“That’s... wow,” Ranboo says. “I’m sorry you had to deal with that stuff.”

Tubbo shrugs. “It wasn’t actually that big of a deal. Didn’t happen again after that anyway, because Tommy stuck around. I wasn’t really good at making friends back then, and I’m not any better now, but I always had Tommy, so that didn’t really matter.”

He’s always had Tommy.

Despite his best efforts to keep this out of his head, there’s a lost feeling leeching into him. Like someone’s upset the magnetism of Earth’s poles, and now the compass inside Tubbo is spinning wildly, not knowing where to point.

Ranboo’s quiet for a moment, and then there’s a rustle of movement. Tubbo glances up to see Ranboo settling himself beside Tubbo, mask back on and legs hanging over the side of the roof beside his own.

He doesn’t say anything. He just sits beside Tubbo.

Normally when Tubbo comes out here, he’s alone. He doesn’t even bring Tommy along. Even if they met here, this tends to be Tubbo’s space alone, just him and his thoughts. It’s where he goes to think, where he goes to get away from everyone. Where he gets to let his guard down and let himself just be. Having another person here would ruin that.

Somehow, though, having Ranboo beside him doesn’t feel like anything’s ruined at all.

That’s pretty weird, isn’t it? It’s definitely weird. That having his best friend here would be wrong, but a stranger isn’t. Maybe a stranger is just safer. If Ranboo disappeared tomorrow, it wouldn’t hurt like losing the only person he’s had almost his whole life.

“I think this town is cursed.” He’s just thinking aloud now. There’s no filter between his mouth and between his head, and he doesn’t feel like he needs to have one. Ranboo listens. “That’s what Quackity told me one time, anyway.”

“Quackity?”

“Quackity is...” Tubbo searches for an explanation. “Somebody who used to be here. He’s sorta here now, but he’s not the same anymore.”

Ranboo has to be confused, but he doesn’t say anything. Maybe he’s not confused. Maybe he understands Tubbo’s jumbled up words and the thoughts behind them.

“He told me we’re all cursed for living here, that if we stay too long, we end up changing. Like all the good stuff gets sucked out of people and it turns them into an entirely different person. A worse person.” Tubbo pulls his feet up onto the roof, leaning forward onto his knees. “I think he’s kind of full of bullshit, cuz it’s not like some evil witch cast a spell on a town full of people to turn them evil too, or whatever. But I think... I think part of it’s right. People change all the time, and this town brings out the worst in that change.”

Ranboo’s still just listening. He nods along with Tubbo’s words.

“People either leave or they change,” Tubbo says. “So I guess he’s right. That’s pretty much all that happens to people here.”

“That sounds like a terrible thing to be around,” Ranboo says.

“It is.” Tubbo spares a glance to Ranboo. He’s looking down at the playground with a thoughtful look in his eyes. “Makes you scared of who’s gonna change next. If it’ll be me who ends up different.”

Ranboo says, ever so quietly, “I hope not.”

Hm.

Abruptly, Tubbo lies back on the roof, staring upwards. The clouds are painted orange and pink with the sunset. He’s gotta get home soon so Phil doesn’t flip when he gets back. Or Techno. Techno’s supposed to be asleep, though, so maybe he wouldn’t even notice.

“Do you like the stars?” Tubbo asks.

“Hm?” Ranboo looks over at him. “Yeah, they’re nice.”

“They are,” Tubbo agrees. “You can see them pretty well from here. I come out here at night sometimes, and if you just lay on the roof with a blanket, you can see so many of them. It’s a good view.”

Ranboo lies back on the roof too. Like he’s imagining what the stars look like.

“Someday,” Tubbo says, “I’ll meet you here for stargazing. When I can be out past dark again.”

“That sounds nice,” Ranboo says.

Tubbo knows he’s only just met Ranboo. He knows he’s got a problem with latching too quickly onto people who are even a little nice to him.

He also knows he kinda doesn't care. He really likes Ranboo. He feels more comfortable here on a rickety pavilion roof looking up at sunset-pink clouds with a near-stranger at his side than he has a single other moment since Wednesday night. Maybe since before that too.

The sun is nearly gone behind the horizon. He needs to get back home before it gets too dark.

But it feels so nice here.

Ranboo shifts slightly, inching a little closer to Tubbo. They're not touching, but if he wanted to, Tubbo could bump his hand against Ranboo's. It would be really easy.

Tubbo can wait a few more minutes.

---

Quackity's been wandering listlessly around Sapnap's apartment all day. Sapnap is at work, Karl's at work, and there's nobody else Quackity really feels comfortable contacting when he feels like this. When it's *this* bad. When he keeps spacing out for tens of minutes at a time, and that empty, aching restlessness spreads from his chest to his limbs, his hands, his feet.

Once upon a time, he would've called Wilbur. It's been too many years since then, though.

He turns on the tv just to hear it make noise, and then turns it off again when the sound gets overwhelming. He gets a shower and then dissociates the entire time, stood still in place until the water runs cold enough to shock him out of it. He makes food, a frozen microwave dinner he finds in the back of Sapnap's freezer, and then he has to keep reheating it because he forgets about it no less than four times.

All the while, something inside of him tugs him back to that place in his mind, to a memory that isn't his. A forest floor, and leaves and dirt and roots, and a hole in his chest that isn't a hole anymore but a cavity built specially for something else to use.

Around two in the afternoon, he remembers to write things down on a scrap of paper. It helps to keep it all organized somewhere less fallible than his mind is on these days. He can look back on it later, remind himself that this isn't the first time this has happened, that this isn't the worst it's ever been. That this just is how things work when he's back in this awful, awful town.

So he has a neat little list of times and broken sentences and the most fleeting of memories of what they mean.

2:07. Outside on the street. Went back in.

He only remembers going back inside and jotting the note down. He doesn't remember going out, or putting on the hoodie and shoes he's wearing when he gets back into the apartment.

4:14. Standing in kitchen. Can't find beanie?

There's a leaf in his hair. He doesn't know if it's left there from going outside earlier, or if it's more recent. He hunts the apartment for where he'd left his beanie, before giving up and digging the spare out of his suitcase.

5:41.

There's no note attached. Quackity zones back in looking down at the paper, pen in hand, and he can't remember what he'd been about to write.

*God*, he hates these days.

He's almost tempted to just get ahold of Sapnap and risk the embarrassment of having him come home early from work just to babysit his friend who can't keep his brain screwed on straight today. His shift is over at 8 according to the calendar on the fridge, though, so it's just a couple more hours. Quackity can survive that long. He'll be fine for two more hours.

He was wrong. He will *not* be fine for two more hours.

He'd spaced out a bit, and now he's standing on the sidewalk, and the sun is going down, and the woods are just in front of him. He swears, glances around, tries to get his bearings again.

That aching inside of him is tugging at him, coaxing his feet forward.

It would be so easy. A little too easy, to just walk a little further, step through the tree line, walk ahead, lie himself down in the leaves and dirt. Close his eyes and let the roots of the trees take over, let them have that emptiness where his heart should be, because god knows they've been asking for it for so long.

He's been resisting for so long. He's *tired*. It would be so easy to lay down and let go. To not have to do this anymore.

His hands weigh heavy at his side, calling for the ground below them. His empty chest aches for something to finally fill it.

He could lie himself down here, and nobody would ever find him. They never find anyone in these woods.

The woods are dark. Quackity is sitting with his back against a tree. He doesn't know how long he's been sitting here, but it's long enough that his fingers have gone numb with cold. The grass is freezing cold beneath him, little rocks and twigs poke uncomfortably into his legs, and his back is stiff and aching. Despite all this, there's no urgency in him to get up. He's already been out here so long, he might as well stay a little longer.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knows that he should be worried about this. That it has not been this bad in a *long* time. But in the rest of the mind, he's just tired and there is some sort of comfort in staying here alone in the woods where no one will find him.

Except he's not alone.

With a jolt, Quackity realizes there's a person here. An anxious, unsettled feeling sinks into him, because he doesn't know how long they've been there. He hadn't even noticed.

A tall figure, their back to him, a few feet away and looking further into the trees. They don't move, but Quackity feels an immediate instinctive bolt of panic. Suddenly, it's much easier to get to his feet, as quietly and quickly as possible, when fear overrides the fuzzy exhaustion, and his mind clicks into gear just to tell him to run.

He almost does run. His whole body is tense and ready to flee, and then he recognizes the colorblock windbreaker and the mess of brown hair. His feet are frozen in place.

"Karl?"

Quackity tries to drag the story out of Karl as they walk back to Sapnap's together, but Karl seems every bit as confused as he is. There's a blank look in his eyes, and it's a little terrifying to Quackity.

"You don't remember why you were in the woods?" Quackity presses.

"I was at work," Karl says, sounding dazed. "I didn't know I left."

Quackity has to hold onto his arm to keep him walking ahead. "Didn't the library close at five today?"

Karl looks thoughtful. "Yeah. Did I remember to lock the doors?"

"We'll figure that out later," Quackity says. He's already checked for any sign of injury, but it doesn't seem like Karl's hurt, no blood or bruises or any sign of concussion past the memory thing. So he'll just get him to Sapnap and then... then they'll figure out what to do.

When they get to the apartment, Sapnap's car is already parked outside. In the hall, the door is thrown open right as Quackity reaches for the doorknob. Sapnap's gaze flicks between him and Karl, and for a moment Quackity can see a wave of fear and then relief crash over his face.

"There you are," Sapnap says. He's holding a scrap of paper in his hand - oh. The list. "You—this was on the table, I couldn't find you, and..."

"Sorry," Quackity says. "Uh, before we talk about that, can—Karl needs to come in and sit down."

"I'm okay," Karl says, but he sounds distant. Like he's not really paying attention. Instantly, another flash of concern crosses Sapnap's face, and he steps back to open the door wider, letting them both in.

Sapnap's in mother hen mode. Quackity has known him long enough to recognize it, and to know he gets it from his dad. The moment he's worried, even the slightest amount of concern, it's like a switch flips inside of him and the only way he can cope with it is to do as much as he can for everyone in the room. He ushers Karl into a chair at the kitchen table, gets him a cup of water, and then seems to change his mind and herds both him and Quackity into the living room to the couch instead.

"I'll make hot chocolate," he says. "It's freezing out there, I don't know how long you were out but you both look frozen, here, Quackity your fingers look so red—"

"I'm fine, Sap," Quackity starts, but it's a useless statement. Sapnap grabs his hands and sandwiches them between his own, eyebrows furrowed in concern. "You're so cold, holy shit. Yeah, I'm making the hot chocolate."

For a brief moment, with Sapnap's fingers clasped around his own, Quackity feels like there's something inside of his chest. It flutters there, warm and unusual and leaving him breathless. The hole is still there, but for just a second, something else soars inside of the empty space.

He doesn't have a chance to figure out anything else about it before Sapnap's moved on, dropping Quackity's fingers to cup Karl's face in his warm hands instead, fussing over his boyfriend with complaints of how *fucking cold they both are, neither of them are wearing jackets near warm enough for this weather, are they trying to give him a heart attack?*

There's a blanket on the back of the couch, the one Quackity's been using. Sapnap settles it around Karl's shoulders, and then drags the other end over Quackity's shoulders too.

"Sapnap," Quackity says, trying to get past the fretting to get his friend to listen to him.

"Stay here and warm up," Sapnap says instead. "I'm going to make that hot chocolate."

And then he's back in the kitchen before anyone can argue. Karl certainly doesn't argue; he lists to the side, head falling against Quackity's shoulder as he pulls the blanket closer around him.

Quackity lets out a quiet sigh. He'll get Sapnap to stop and listen eventually.

'Eventually' turns out to take another twenty minutes, after Sapnap has made hot chocolate only for Karl to fall asleep on Quackity's shoulder before he can drink any. Sapnap gets Karl to bed, leaving Quackity to sip at the drinks alone.

When Sapnap comes back, he finally sits down on the couch beside Quackity, a heavy sigh escaping his mouth. Quackity gives him a moment, watching the way his head tips back against the couch and his eyes close like he's catching his breath. He gives him a few moments extra.

"Sap," he says, breaking the silence. "I'm worried about Karl."

He doesn't raise his head from the couch. "Where did you find him?"



“The woods,” Quackity says. That gets Sapnap’s eyes open. “He was standing there like he didn’t know where he was or how he got there.”

Sapnap scrubs a hand over his face. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Quackity says.

Sapnap’s quiet for a moment, and then he says quietly, “He’s been doing this more and more lately. Losing pieces of his memory.”

Quackity stares at him. “For how long?”

“A few weeks,” Sapnap says. “Or a couple months now, since it’s become bad enough to really tell. I don’t know. It’s been a lot. I’ve been driving him to doctors appointments and we keep getting referred to more specialists further and further away but they still can’t figure out... Tests and scans come back clear, he’s not sick, his brain is fine, he just keeps *forgetting*.”

Quackity aches numbly. He didn’t even know. He says it aloud, his voice breaking a little at the end. “I didn’t even *know*.”

Sapnap turns his head to give him a sad smile. “I know. Why would you?”

It’s like a punch directly to the gut. He hadn’t said it unkindly; he didn’t mean it to be a jab. It *wasn’t* a jab. It’s just the truth.

Quackity left. He left this town, and he left everyone behind, and he has no real idea what’s happened here since he’s been gone.

It’s so clear that he has no idea.

“I’m sorry,” he finally gets out. “That’s—that’s really hard for both of you, I’m sorry... I’m sorry I haven’t been around, and I haven’t been in touch, and I’m just *sorry*—”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Sapnap says, reaching his arms out to Quackity, and Quackity decides to let him. He leans forward, lets warm arms wrap around him, and even though he feels like he shouldn’t be the one receiving comfort right now, it feels far too nice to stop. “I... you’ve been through a lot, and I get that. I can’t even imagine how hard things are for you to be back here.”

Quackity turns his head, resting on Sapnap’s shoulder and looking away from him. “I wish I was here for you more.”

“I wish I was there for *you* more,” Sapnap says, quiet, genuine. “I wish we didn’t end up so far away so often.”

“I’m sorry,” Quackity says again. Sapnap squeezes his arms around him a little tighter. It feels like forgiveness. It feels like an ache inside Quackity’s chest.

“We still need to talk about earlier,” Sapnap murmurs, but he doesn’t let go. Quackity’s sinking further against his chest, and Sapnap shifts to lean back, until it feels more like cuddling than hugging. He’s pretty sure this is the most sustained affection he’s gotten in at least a month. Probably longer.

“It was just dissociation stuff,” Quackity says in return, still not bothering to lift his head enough to look up when he speaks. “It happens. Just bad days.”

Sapnap runs a hand through the hair peeking out of the back of Quackity’s beanie. “We should get you a phone. You should’ve been able to call me when things were bad.”

“Hmm.” Quackity doesn’t argue. Now that he’s here, warm, comfortable, relaxing a little more with every passing moment, he feels so tired. Heaviness still drags at his arms and legs, but now it’s the pull of exhaustion, not the emptiness in his chest calling him somewhere else. There’s that little flutter in his chest too, and Quackity *knows* he should be worried about that. He’s too tired to really pick it apart tonight, but it’s not a good sign. It’s yet one more complicated, messy thing in him, here to make things so much worse.

Just his luck.

Part of him wants to get up, off of Sapnap’s chest, put distance between them before something hurts. Part of him doesn’t want to move ever, wants Sapnap to hold him a little tighter and never let go. Everything is messy and tangled, in his head, in his chest, and he wishes it would all rearrange itself into a pattern that makes more sense.

But his eyes are closing and he can hear Sapnap’s heartbeat under his ear. He’s warm, he’s tired, he’s as close to safe as he could ever hope to be.

He’ll untangle this mess tomorrow. For now, he lets himself fall asleep.

## Chapter End Notes

ALSO GUYS!!!! there's fanart for last chapter and its WONDERFUL, i'm still crying about it. please go check it out (blood tw!) and give the artist some love!  
<https://kittelsin.tumblr.com/post/657827785172271104/please-god-read-devil-town-by-hoorayy-im-begging>

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

It's strange. It's uncomfortable. They're a family who have all forgotten how to be in the same room. Techno would marvel at how it's taken only four days for them to fall this far, but the truth is, they forgot how to be a family a long time ago. Tommy's absence has only revealed a wound that's been festering for years.

## Chapter Notes

hello everyone!! slightly early update on this chapter because i finished it ahead of time and wanted to get it out now. it's a bit short because i just didn't have as much motivation to write as i'd hoped to, and i don't want to push myself into burning out. so i'm taking it a bit slower with the next chapter - we might skip the next wednesday update and actually just have one chapter this week. as eager as i am to finish this fic, the last thing i want to do is put out subpar writing! hopefully that's okay with you guys and you're willing to be patient for the next chapter <3

i also wanted to say, thank you SO MUCH for all the love this fic has received so far. every comment is near and dear to my heart. imagine me gently holding every comment in my cupped hands and giving them a gentle kiss. i love hearing from you guys so much.

ANYWAY onto the chapter. warnings in this one for panic attacks and emetophobia - if you want details on where to stop reading to skip those scenes, check the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For the first time since Wednesday morning, there are four people in their kitchen.

Techno has been here the longest, up early with a cup of coffee and a long-abandoned bowl of cereal. Phil had spared him only the mildest of disapproving looks when he walked in, but Techno is so far past caring. He'd barely slept all night, constantly plagued by more dreams and panicked moments between them where he could *swear* he could hear Tommy, just out of reach.

He's giving up on getting his keys back today. The restless sleep makes him feel more unsettled and exhausted than he had before.

Wilbur stumbles out of his room next, fixing his own mug of coffee and starting on eggs. There's a quiet exchange of '*good mornings*' between Techno and his twin, and then another lapse of silence. The smell of breakfast cooking drags Tubbo in last, still in pyjamas with cowlicked hair sticking up all over his head. Wilbur adds another egg to the pan without a word.

So now they're all here, sat around the same table, varying degrees of awake. None of them speak, engrossed in eating or staring at the table or just waiting for someone else to break the silence.

It's strange. It's uncomfortable. They're a family who have all forgotten how to be in the same room. Techno would marvel at how it's taken only four days for them to fall this far, but the truth is, they forgot how to be a family a long time ago. Tommy's absence has only revealed a wound that's been festering for years.

Phil is the one to break the silence. He clears his throat, and the tension around all of them feels heavy enough to cut through.

"So," Phil starts off. "We should probably talk about this."

Silence stretches out again after that, just for a second, but feels like longer. Wilbur and Techno watching Phil expectantly. Tubbo is still looking at his breakfast. Phil looks like he wishes anyone else would speak up and take over for him.

"It's been... It's been a difficult last few days," Phil says, and Techno tiredly wishes he'd just get to it. "We've all been pretty scattered and stressed, and that's more than understandable, all things considered."

Everyone is allergic to the words "*Tommy is gone.*" Nobody wants to acknowledge it aloud.

"I think," Phil says, "What we need is a plan for this next week. At this point, we've done about all we can do, and we need to come up with an idea of how we're going to move forward. We can't keep working ourselves like we have the past few days, it's becoming unhealthy."

Phil looks between all three of them evenly as he speaks, but his gaze falls heavily on Techno when he says those last few words. Techno looks away.

"What are you suggesting, exactly?" Wilbur asks.

"I think we need to stop joining the search parties," Phil says. "Or at least limit them."

"No," Techno says. It jumps out of his mouth before he even thinks about it. Curse of being sleep-deprived; no filter. "Not gonna happen."

"Techno," Phil starts, but Techno shakes his head.

"You can do whatever you want, Phil," Techno says. "But that forest is huge. The more people out there looking, the higher the chance that someone finds something."

“You don’t need to be among that number every day,” Phil says.

Techno’s hands curl into fists, and he breathes in slowly, hands relaxing as he exhales. “I didn’t go out last night. There’s your break.”

“You didn’t rest either, though,” Phil says. “I heard you get up *several* times.”

“Right, because *you’re* sleeping perfectly,” Techno snaps at him. “How’d you hear all the times I was up?”

There’s an angry buzzing in his head, frustrated tension in his chest, and that familiar nausea in his stomach. How is he expected to sleep as if nothing’s bothering him? Tommy is *out there*, and Techno should be able to just relax and forget about it?

Phil’s face is carefully impassive. There’s an uncomfortable silence for a long moment. Wilbur is just watching. Tubbo still looks down at his plate, and if he didn’t know better, Techno would wonder if he’d even heard a word of this.

“I’m suggesting this for the good of *all* of us,” Phil says coolly. “I know none of us have been handling this well, and I’m not trying to act like I’m doing any better. *Trust me*, I’m as upset as all of you are. I’d love to be out there tearing this whole fucking town apart with my own hands until I find Tommy myself. But that’s not healthy, and it’s not productive.”

Right now, Techno doesn’t care. It doesn’t matter what’s healthy or productive, what matters is that Tommy is somewhere that is not here and none of them know where that somewhere is. Techno doesn’t want to rest until they’ve answered that question. He doesn’t know if he *can* rest.

“We’ve looked everywhere that’s available to us,” Phil continues. “I’ve called everyone I could possibly think of, even Tommy’s biological relatives. None of them have heard from him.”

Something turns in Techno’s head. They aren’t supposed to have contact with those relatives, he’s pretty sure. The ones still alive are only distantly related to Tommy anyway, and none of them live anywhere even close to nearby. “What if they have him?”

“They’ve already been investigated,” Phil says. “Trust me, Techno. I’ve been doing everything I can.”

Techno rubs his temples. His mind is running off down that trail anyway, though he knows logically, it’s definitely a dead end. It would take a plane trip with money he doesn’t have in order to look into it himself.

“So you want us to stop looking,” Tubbo interjects, his voice flat.

“No—not stop entirely,” Phil says. “Just keep in mind that there are authorities looking for him now, and they have access to resources that we don’t have. Anything we can do, they’ve already done ten times faster and easier.”

Techno wants to scream, because how does that *help*? He should feel better, knowing someone capable is looking, but he doesn't. He feels like shit being told to just sit down and let someone else take care of things.

"Okay," Tubbo says. "So what are we supposed to do, then?"

"First, rest," Phil says. "I think today, we should all stay home and rest. And after that, we take it one day at a time and try to ease back into a routine like we had before, with school and work. Take care of ourselves and make sure no one is running themselves ragged."

"You want us to act like things are normal." Tubbo's looked up now, not quite glaring at Phil, but something angry in his expression anyway.

Techno takes his side. "Are you saying you want all of us to go back to school this week? You're gonna start back to work tomorrow and move on too?"

"Of course I'm not," Phil says, sounding annoyed too now. Tension continues to rise. "You can easily take another week off if you don't want to go back yet. Eventually you'll have to go back anyway, but if you need more time—"

"I'm not going back to school without Tommy," Tubbo says shortly. "I'll drop out. I'm not doing it."

"You want Wilbur to just leave again too?" Techno says, and he knows he's crossing a line now. Wilbur flinches. There's a bit of vindication in Techno's chest, ugly and pleased. "If we're going back to normal, he shouldn't be here either."

"Techno," Phil warns, but Wilbur gets to his feet before anything else can be said.

"I know you don't want me here," Wilbur snaps, his eyes dark as he makes eye contact with his twin. "You hate having me around, and that's fine, I get it. But I'm Tommy's brother too, and I get to look for him as much as you do."

Techno wants to laugh in his face. He wants to cry. *He* hates having Wilbur around, Wilbur says, as if Techno is the one who left.

"And what a great brother you were to him, too," Techno snaps. Wilbur's eyes flash with anger and hurt, and Techno's stomach churns with the same things.

"I *did my best*." Wilbur's voice is low, almost a snarl. "Don't act like you know what me and Tommy's relationship was like. At least he bothered to call."

"You never even *tried* to talk to me." Techno's on his feet too now, even though the kitchen is still wavering around him and the floor feels unsteady beneath his feet. He keeps both hands on the table for balance. "Don't pin that back on me. If you wanted me to call, maybe you should've expressed that literally ever."

"What, and listen to you tell me this shit? About how I've fucked up and how much of a better brother you are? 'Cause I've got news for you, Techno, you're not better than me just because you're too fucking scared to set foot out of Dad's house."

“Okay,” Phil says. “That’s enough.”

Techno barely hears him. Anger burns hot and ugly in his chest. “At least I was actually here for Tommy.”

Wilbur laughs, bitter and scoffing. “And how’d that turn out for him?”

There’s a heartbeat loud in his ears, blood rushing and something buzzing in the back of his head. In his stomach, anger and guilt and nausea churn together, clawing at the inside of him and making it hard to breathe. The floor is uneven and his vision is blurred. All he can hear is his own heartbeat and his own heavy breathing, and he doesn’t know what to say, fury blocking his throat, everything is blurry and wrong—

“...to take a break,” Phil is saying. There’s a hand on Techno’s shoulder. Tubbo. Techno glances at him, and Tubbo just blinks and then points at Techno’s chair. Wilbur’s already sitting down in his own chair, arms folded over his chest.

Techno’s having a hard time catching his breath. His heart is still racing in his chest, in his ears, in his throat. His hands feel like they’re tingling.

“Techno,” Phil says. Hearing his name snaps Techno’s attention right to him. “You need to go lie down. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

His tone leaves no room for argument. Techno feels like a scolded child, and he might be embarrassed if he didn’t feel more like he might pass out here at the kitchen table.

“Okay,” he says, the word coming out short and clipped. He shrugs Tubbo’s hand from his shoulder and does his best to walk evenly, avoiding tripping over his own feet. He pulls it off, because no one goes after him, and he makes it all the way to his room without stumbling.

With the door locked behind him and lying on his back in bed, the world keeps spinning. His heart still beats far too quickly, and he can’t keep his breathing under control. This isn’t a normal side effect of sleep deprivation, is it? Maybe it’s the coffee. Caffeine does this to a person, doesn’t it? He’s sure had enough of it the past few days.

Maybe Techno’s dying. Maybe his heart’s gonna keep going too fast until eventually it gives out while he’s lying here on this bed, and everyone is downstairs thinking he’s taking a nap and they won’t even check on him until it’s far too late.

His breathing hitches in his throat. He doesn’t actually want to die.

He leverages himself off of the bed and only manages to fall to his knees beside it instead. Maybe the noise of that was enough to get someone’s attention. Maybe they’ll come check on him. Maybe—

The room spins around him. His breath is harsh in his ears, and he can’t catch it, and his heart is beating so loudly and so fast, and he feels sick, *so sick*, and it’s his fault Tommy is gone so it’s his fault that Tubbo is going to drop out of school and it’s his fault Phil is so stressed, and maybe it’s his fault Wilbur hates him too, maybe if he’d done something better before Wilbur

wouldn't have left. He's gonna die here on his bedroom floor and everyone hates him, the world won't stop spinning and he can't breathe and he's *tired*—

Oh. Panic attack.

In hindsight, he definitely should've caught that faster. He shifts off of his knees, curling forward and fingertips digging into opposite arms, trying - and mostly failing - to wrangle his breathing into something slower.

Techno is a problem solver. When something goes wrong, he finds a solution and he fixes it. That's how he works. Problems start to arise when he can't find a solution, but for things like this, he can manage.

He knows the solution for this. He's memorized breathing exercises and talked himself through panic attacks before. This is easy. This he can handle.

He's not dying. The world does not hate him. His heart is not going to give up at any second and he's not going to pass out either. This is just a panic attack, and he'll survive it like he's survived every other one.

It takes several long minutes before it happens, and there's a few moments he's pretty sure he actually might pass out, but eventually, he manages to drag in a deep breath and let it all out again. He does it a few more times, just for good measure, and then he drags himself back up on his bed and collapses.

God. As if he wasn't tired enough before. He genuinely feels like his whole body is going to start shutting down one piece at a time.

Maybe this is the magic solution to his sleep issues. Just have a massive panic attack first and then he'll konk right out. He almost laughs. It's a really funny thought to him just then, sleep-deprived and adrenaline-drained. He's found a solution to the problem.

He's asleep in seconds.

The darkness is back and winding their way around him again. The walls are close around him, something is ever so gently dragging him down, and his mind is far from his reach, but he can't bring himself to care. He's tired. It's warm here.

He stays there, not asleep but at rest all the same, and time drifts lazily by. That tangible grip around his arms continues to wrap around him, coaxing him further into the darkness, and he lets it. Why would he fight it? It's not going to hurt him. They wouldn't hurt him. He's not truly himself, anyway - he's *them* too, or they are him, and he's safe here.

He's not alone here.

It takes an eternity, or just a few moments, before his eyes flutter open - and he's still there, in the dark, far from home, and something feels wrong.



But... it can't be wrong. They wouldn't hurt him.

Who are they?

He fights his mind into his grasp, and he doesn't know where he is, can't remember what he was just thinking a moment before. Something grabs at his wrists and won't let go, even when he tugs against it. It's pulling him, and he pulls back, struggling with building panic in his chest, *where is he*, what is this—

Nothing is on him. He's falling, falling, falling, the floor is gone and he's lost his balance and everything is darkness.

He's not falling anymore, but he never lands. Nothing grabs at his wrists, but he still can't move. It's completely dark, but he sees one shape clearly.

His brother sits with his knees against his chest. Blood paints his face and his hair crimson, and red is the only color Techno can see, and there is so much of it. Tommy's looking back at him, eyes grey when Techno *knows* they should be blue, but he's looking through him, not at him.

Techno can't move. He wants to *so badly*, it tears at him and screams in his head, *go, go, go*, but he's frozen in place. All he can do is look, and it's almost worse than seeing at all.

"Hi," Tommy says, and even his voice sounds grey. Tired and lifeless. Techno can't get his mouth open to reply. "Hurry up and find me, okay? I want to go home."

*I'm looking*, Techno wants to say. He's screaming it in his head, louder and louder, trying to get Tommy to hear. To know that he hasn't given up for a second. *I'm trying so hard, I'm looking. I want you to come home.*

Tommy lowers his chin, resting it on arms wrapped over his knees. "Miss you."

Techno fights with his whole body, with every bit of himself and every ounce of strength he can muster against this thing holding him in place. He has to. He *has to*, it's desperation and determination at once, until he fights his mouth open and echoes two words back to his brother.

"Miss you."

Two things happen.

First, Tommy jerks his head up, eyes going wide, and they refocus. They look *at* Techno. "You can hear me."

And before he says another word, the entire world tips on its side.

Tommy's gone, and Techno falls. He hits something, something moving, and it grabs him again, around his wrists, his arms, his legs, his neck. He can move now, and now he fights it. He can open his mouth and now he *screams*, he screams Tommy's name and he screams for

someone to find him and he screams wordless cries of anger, hurt, fury, and he fights as useless as he's ever been as this thing pulls him down.

*We won't hurt you*, a voice in his ear whispers. *Just let go. You did so well earlier, and we let you have what you want. You want that again, don't you?*

He doesn't stop fighting or screaming. He'll fight until his body stops working and scream until his throat is bloody and raw. He doesn't *care*.

*You do care.*

He doesn't know where this voice is coming from, but it's in his head, in his ears, all around him and louder and louder. Hands over his ears, and it doesn't go away.

*You care about him. We care about you. Let go, and we all get what we want. We won't hurt you.*

Techno is on his feet as the world spins around him before he even registers that he's awake. His room is dark, he feels dizzy and disoriented, but he needs to *go*.

The floor lurches beneath him when he takes a single step. He catches himself on his door, holding himself up with the door knob and shoving it open with a slam.

He can't see. Everything is dark and blurry and fuzzy, and he needs to go, he needs to find him, he has to—

“Techno?”

Tubbo stands in the hall, eyebrows pinched in concern. Techno stares at him wordlessly for a long moment, trying to work his mouth into a shape that lets him speak.

“I,” he gasps, and then it all spills out. “I have to go, I saw him, he's—they have him, they want me, I need to go, I have to—”

The world spins around him, and his stomach lurches as it does. His knees nearly give out, but something stops him from falling. He hears those voices still echoing around his head. It sounds like they're laughing.

*“Dad! Wilbur! Someone!”*

That one's Tubbo's voice, not in his head. It's Tubbo that kept him from falling, he realizes, a small arm wrapped around his shoulders and dragging him upright as Techno struggles back to his feet. Techno's stomach continues to churn.

“Bathroom,” Tubbo says, guiding Techno down the hall. Techno just goes where he's directed, focused on keeping his feet under him while panic spins in his head and chest.

“I saw him,” Techno chokes out again.

Tubbo eases him to kneeling on the bathroom floor. “You’re delirious as hell. Where’s—”

Techno never hears the rest of that sentence. His stomach twists painfully, and he’s lucky he’s already this close to the toilet. Good thinking on Tubbo’s part.

He coughs and gags as he empties his stomach of the last thing he’d eaten - coffee and cereal. It still smells vaguely like bitter caffeine. Someone’s hands run through his hair, holding it back from his face. A sob escapes his mouth too, burning in his throat.

“It’s okay,” Phil’s voice says soothingly from behind him. “You’re okay.”

“I *saw him*,” Techno sobs, his voice breaking. “I saw him, Dad, he’s—he’s all alone, I have to find him—”

“You have a bad fever,” Phil says gently. “It was a dream. It’s okay.”

“It *wasn’t*,” Techno insists. He’s shaking, barely able to hold himself up anymore. “I saw—He was—”

Phil’s pressing a glass of water into his hands, and Techno doesn’t fight him as he guides it to his lips, rinses the acidic taste from his mouth. Carefully, Phil gets an arm beneath Techno’s shoulders, helping him back to his feet.

“Let’s get you into bed. I knew you needed more rest.”

“I’m sorry,” Techno says, wanting to cry all over again. He is crying all over again. “I’m sorry, I... I...”

“It’s okay,” Phil shushes. He helps Techno to sit on the edge of his own bed, and then gets him to swallow more water along with medicine. Techno still feels incredibly dizzy, but the nausea in his stomach has all but disappeared. Exhaustion still weighs his limbs, and his head feels like it’s fuzzy and floating above him.

He’s barely aware of lying down again, barely aware of Phil tucking the bed sheet over him and a gentle hand on his forehead. Quiet voices murmur from the doorway, though Techno can’t make them out.

Voices murmur inside his head too. Techno can’t make those out either, and he doesn’t want to. They’re still calling to him as exhaustion closes his eyes once again.

The absence of Tommy haunts all of his dreams.

## Chapter End Notes

to skip the panic attack scene, stop reading at the line “With the door locked behind him and lying on his back in bed[...]” and skip to the end of that scene. for the emetophobia

warning, skip the paragraph that starts “Techno never hears the rest of that sentence.” and the paragraph after that one as well.

thank you for reading! <3

EDIT: also! we have another piece of fanart! check out this sweet drawing of tubbo and ranboo eating their pizza from last chapter:

<https://kittelsin.tumblr.com/post/658015637293170688/hes-having-an-okay-day-once-again-im>

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Summary

Tubbo wakes up the next morning facing the wall, his back to Tommy's bed. When he's half-asleep, he feels like things could be normal. The last remnants of his dreams still cling to his tired mind, and he could almost imagine soft snores across the room. He stays like that as long as he can, dozing off for a few more minutes. For as long as he stays asleep, everything is okay. With his eyes closed, the world is as it should be. When sleep finally betrays and leaves him, he wastes no time getting dressed and leaving the room. There's no use being in there any longer than he has to. The feeling that he's leaving something important behind follows him the rest of the day.

## Chapter Notes

JUMPSCARE! surprise early update! and it's a beast of a chapter too. i don't know what happened. it wasn't intended to be this long, but here we are anyway. i'm hoping to get a wednesday update in this week too! feeling good about my writing. we'll see!

no specific content warnings on this chapter that don't apply to the entirety of the fic already.

as always, big huge thank you to dylanapollo for beta reading and to everyone who leaves nice comments and theories and bookmarks!! i appreciate you guys so much, thank you for genuinely giving me the motivation to write. you're all so lovely and i appreciate you all!! <33

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After Techno gets sick, the whole house goes oddly quiet.

Phil brought a chair up to his room earlier and has been at Techno's side ever since. Meanwhile, Wilbur and Tubbo sit in the living room, an uncomfortable silence hanging over them. Tubbo's on the couch, sprawled out and scrolling through his phone with one earbud in, aimlessly hopping from video to video. Wilbur sits in the armchair, legs over the side and phone in hand too.

It's too early for bed and too late to do anything else. Tubbo refuses to spend a moment longer than he has to in his own too-empty bedroom, and Wilbur doesn't seem interested in

going to his own yet either. So they're both just sit here in awkward silence, waiting for the other to give up and go.

Sunday evenings used to be Tubbo's favorite. Even though he and Tommy would whine about school the next day, he looked forward to what often turned into a movie night or board games or just simply hanging out. He and Tommy usually started it, dragging Techno and Phil in easily. Sometimes Phil started it, calling everyone into the living room for capital-F-Family capital-T-Time. He usually did that when he'd been at work too long the week before and felt bad about it, Tubbo had figured out. Techno nearly always complained about being pulled away from whatever he'd been doing before, telling them to 'just wait til they were in college and see if they like the workload then,' but he'd cave after a few carefully timed pleading eyes or insults.

It was nice. They were Tubbo's favorite days, even if he could tell that sometimes, there was something off about them. A silence that would hang a little too long between some jokes and a space where no one sat that felt a little too empty. Wilbur's been gone awhile, but not long enough that his absence wasn't loud. Tubbo barely lived here at the same time as him, and even he can tell.

And now Wilbur is here, sat the wrong way on the armchair in the living room on a Sunday evening, and there's still empty space anyway.

Wilbur clears his throat, and Tubbo realizes he's looking up from his phone now. He'd zoned out and didn't notice.

"So," Wilbur says. "Do you have any plans for this week? I was thinking if you wanted to go anywhere, I can drive you. Since I'm not doing a lot else."

Tubbo studies him. Tries to figure out if there's an underlying motive for that. Guilt, maybe. Trying to make things up to Tubbo, and maybe to people besides him too. Guilt motivates a lot of people, Tubbo's figured out.

"Not really," Tubbo says. "I don't go a lot of places."

"Okay." Wilbur fidgets with his phone, clicking the volume buttons up and down. *Click, click.* Up, down. "We could do something if you wanted? Drive out to the theatre and catch a film. You could bring a friend if you wanted. Who's the one you hung out with this weekend, Ranboo?"

"Yeah," Tubbo says.

"I don't think I know them. Are they new to town?"

Tubbo bites back a comment about Wilbur knowing any of his friends. "No. He's lived here awhile."

Wilbur's button clicking continues. Up, down.

“Well, you know. Just let me know if you want me to drive you guys somewhere or anything.”

“Okay.”

Wilbur lapses into silence, and Tubbo follows. He closes out of the video he’s had open, not sure what any of it was about. He wasn’t paying any attention to it.

*Click, click.*

“Have you talked to Quackity recently?” Wilbur asks abruptly. Tubbo’s shoulders go tense in an instant.

“No,” Tubbo says flatly. “You saw him the last time I did.”

“I know,” Wilbur says. “I guess I meant like, before that. I didn’t even know he was in town. I thought he left for good before I moved out.”

“He did,” Tubbo says. “And then he came back and left for good again, and came back and left for good again.”

Quackity’s really good at leaving for good and then showing up again a year later with no explanation, Tubbo’s realized. It doesn’t give Tubbo much hope for his own future. He hopes he’s more stubborn than Quackity is. He hopes when he gets out of here, nothing ever drags him back.

“Did you find out why he keeps coming back?”

“No,” Tubbo says. “We don’t talk, Wilbur. If you want to find out what he’s up to, ask him yourself.”

“He’s a difficult person to stay in contact with,” Wilbur says. Tubbo huffs, a noise of ironic agreement.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

Wilbur’s looking at him. Tubbo avoids eye contact. Maybe that’ll finally get him to take the hint and he’ll stop asking all these questions that are just a cover for the ones he wants to be asking.

Whether or not he’s taken the hint, Tubbo’s saved from the questions. Upstairs, a door closes with a quiet click, and then there’s a creak on the stairs. Phil comes into a view a moment later, his footsteps quiet and careful.

“How is he?” Wilbur asks.

“Asleep,” Phil says. “Finally. He kept waking himself up in a panic, but I think he’s actually resting now. His fever’s still high, though. I’ll check on him again before I go to bed.”

Wilbur nods. He gets to his feet, vacating the armchair for Phil to take. "I'm gonna turn in, then, if we aren't needing a trip to the emergency room."

"Nah," Phil says. He gratefully takes the seat Wilbur offers him, leaning back with a quiet sigh. "He's not dying, just made himself sick from not sleeping and being out in the cold so much. Didn't even hurt himself passing out, thanks to Tubbo."

Tubbo shrugs. "He didn't really pass out. Just lost his balance."

"Either way." Phil gives Tubbo a tired smile. "You did good."

Wilbur bids them both goodnight and heads upstairs to bed. After he's gone, Phil leaves a moment of silence hanging between them before he turns to Tubbo.

"You have a minute?" he asks. "I wanted to talk about earlier."

Tubbo *could* say no. He could feign exhaustion and follow Wilbur upstairs and avoid another awkward conversation he doesn't want to have. But Phil's harder to avoid than Wilbur. Phil will just talk to him again tomorrow.

"Sure," he says.

Phil nods. "I think what I was trying to say earlier didn't really get across to everyone, and I wanted to apologize to you for that. Obviously, I want to talk to everyone again, after Techno's feeling better. But I figured I could start with you, and explain what I was actually trying to say."

Tubbo blinks and just stares. "Okay."

"When I said earlier that I wanted us to think about going back to some kind of routine, I didn't mean that we should just go back to normal. I guess I should've found a better way to phrase it. What I meant was that I worry about how all of us, but you and Techno especially, are gonna be able to cope with this. I worry about both of you, and I want you both to have a way to get through this without... you know, just get through this as easily as you can."

There's this itchy feeling under his skin. "I'm fine."

Phil rests his chin on one hand, blue eyes studying Tubbo unbelievably. It's funny how much Phil looks like Tommy, with the blonde hair and blue eyes nearly the exact same shade. He didn't find out until years into their friendship that the only biologically related people in the whole family were Techno and Wilbur.

"I'm sleeping and eating and whatever," Tubbo says. "I'm not gonna get physically sick because I don't know how to take care of myself. I'm okay."

If he's honest, he thinks Wilbur's more to be worried about than he is. If Techno's good at not taking care of himself until he falls apart, Wilbur's good at doing it in a way nobody can see. Maybe Phil knows that, though. Tubbo still feels like an outsider in their family, sometimes, so he's not going to say that out loud.



“It’s okay if you’re not,” Phil says gently. The careful, soft way he says it makes Tubbo feel like his insides are squirming and he doesn’t want to be looked at. “I don’t think any of us are fine right now, Tubbo. You don’t have to pretend you are.”

“I’m not pretending,” Tubbo says. He’s not, really. This is all him. “I’m not great, obviously, but I’m not acting like I’m great. I’m just okay.”

He’ll be more okay once Tommy is back. After there’s not an empty bed in the room that they share, and he doesn’t have to think about the idea of going to school by himself, and the lost emptiness inside of him goes away. He’ll be better then.

But that’s just obvious. He doesn’t need to say that out loud for Phil to get it.

Ranboo’s waiting for Tubbo outside the library the next day. It’s a cold, windy day, and heavy grey clouds threaten rain at some point. Wilbur reminded him again to call him if he wanted a ride home from the library later, which Tubbo might take him up on if it does rain. He ran nearly the whole way to the library, which means he’s early by ten minutes ahead of their designated meeting time. As he catches his breath, a fleeting thought crosses his mind that maybe it’s a bit odd how early Ranboo is already sitting and waiting. He’d been early the last time they met, too.

Then again, what about his new friend *isn’t* odd?

“Hey boss man,” Tubbo says. “You’re early.”

“I didn’t have anything else to do today,” Ranboo says. “And I was excited.”

Ranboo’s wearing the same jacket he’d worn on Saturday, worn corduroy with frayed edges on the sleeves. It’s the same one he’d worn at McDonalds on Friday too, Tubbo thinks. His hair is pulled back into a messy ponytail with what looks like the same hair tie Tubbo had given him. And of course, he’s got that mask on over most of his face.

There’s something not adding up here, but Tubbo can’t put his finger on it. He’s not going to ask about the mask, because that’s rude and easily explainable. There’s something about his face that Ranboo doesn’t want anyone to see, a scar or something, maybe. That’s not what bothers Tubbo.

What bothers Tubbo is just... everything else. It bothers him that there’s something he can’t figure out. There’s something he doesn’t know, and he doesn’t even know where to start figuring it out.

He likes Ranboo, though. So he’ll be patient and unravel it slowly.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, he opens the library door and gestures inside. “After you.”

“Thanks.” Ranboo steps through the door and then stands in the middle of the entryway, looking awkward and lost. Tubbo brushes his shoes off on the doormat before following Ranboo inside.

The library here is absolutely tiny, but it’s familiar to Tubbo. He likes it. There are memories here, in the little childrens’ corner with bean bag chairs he and Tommy used to fit on, books Techno and Wilbur used to check out and read in dramatic voices after dinner when Tubbo would visit, tables he and Quackity sat at to do homework together when studying at home wasn’t an option.

Karl greets them from the desk. “Hi Tubbo! And Tubbo’s friend!”

“Hi Karl,” Tubbo says. “This is Ranboo.”

Ranboo waves a hand in a wave and an awkward hello.

“Nice to meet you Ranboo,” Karl says. “Welcome to the library, if you haven’t been here before. What are you guys up to, getting books or the secret project again?”

“Secret project,” Tubbo says. Ranboo gives Tubbo a quizzical look, which Tubbo ignores for now. He’ll fill him in later.

“Gotcha.” Karl offers a smile and a wink. “Very secret. I won’t tell. Let me know if you need help with the printer again.”

“I will,” Tubbo says. “Thanks Karl.”

He leads Ranboo over to the tables towards the back of the library. They’re old and scuffed up, and Tubbo knows there are words scratched into the underside too. What feels like a long time ago, he sat here and watched some of those words get scratched in. Now, he drops his backpack onto the table and pulls out a chair. Ranboo mirrors him, sitting down on the other side.

“Secret project?” Ranboo asks quietly. They’re just out of ear shot from the front desk back here.

Before answering, Tubbo unzips his backpack. At the top, stapled together and folded up, are the many many pages he’d printed here on Saturday. He takes it out and sets it on the table in front of Ranboo.

“What’s this?”

“The project,” Tubbo says. “I printed off a directory of every person who lives here. Or everyone who has their information easily accessible online.”

Ranboo gives him a funny look. It’s hard to read exactly with the mask. “That… sounds really sketchy. Why do you need this?”

“You know my brother?”

“...Tommy?” It sounds like Ranboo is guessing.

“Yeah.”

Ranboo turns a page, looking at the other side. A few of the names are crossed out on that side. “I’m guessing it has something to do with looking for him, then.”

Tubbo nods. “This town is small, but it’s not *empty*. Someone had to have seen Tommy when he left for that walk. And that’s somebody in this town who has information we don’t, and I’ll talk to every single person myself if that’s what it takes to get it.”

Ranboo pushes the papers back to Tubbo. “That sounds like a lot of work. There’s a lot of names here.”

“I don’t care,” Tubbo says. “Tommy’s out there somewhere. I’m going to find out where that is and who took him.”

“You’re sure someone took him?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Tubbo says. “He went for a walk on Wednesday night last week. It was late and dark out. He wouldn’t have gone anywhere else on his own. And his phone was dropped on the sidewalk near our house. Somebody grabbed him off the sidewalk on his way home, it had to have been.”

“On his way home? Not after he left?” Ranboo muses.

Tubbo shakes his head. “He texted Techno a few minutes after he left. He would’ve been further from the house already when he sent that. It had to be on the way home.”

Ranboo nods, his eyebrows furrowing. “And Techno is...”

“My older brother,” Tubbo says. Ranboo nods again.

“Older brother. Okay. I’ll remember that.”

He says it like it’s a command to himself, to remember these little details that Tubbo gives him. It’s kind of sweet.

“So this list,” Ranboo continues. “You’re just... going through the whole town talking to everyone?”

Tubbo shrugs. “More or less. I haven’t done a lot yet, it’s hard to get out of the house sometimes and Phil—that’s my dad—has this thing where he wants to know where everyone is all the time. Which makes sense ‘cause, you know. Everything. But I dunno how to say in the group chat we’ve got ‘oh don’t worry father dearest, I’m just going around knocking on random peoples’ doors and asking them if they’ve seen my brother, nothing to be concerned about.’”

“That does sound a little difficult to get away with,” Ranboo agrees.

“Right. So that’s where you come in.”

Ranboo blinks. He looks up and meets Tubbo’s eyes. “Me?”

“You help me go through the list, and then when Phil checks in, I can just tell him we’re hanging out. He’ll let me go out without getting all anxious and overbearing because I won’t be alone, I’ll have a cover story for what I’m doing, *and* we can get you outside more. Everyone wins.”

“That... is strategic,” Ranboo concedes.

“I’m very strategic,” Tubbo says. “All of the time. So you’re in?”

“Sure. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”

Tubbo grins. “Perfect. Okay, meet me at my house tomorrow at noon, and we can start asking around from there.”

Tubbo wakes up the next morning facing the wall, his back to Tommy’s bed. When he’s half-asleep, he feels like things could be normal. The last remnants of his dreams still cling to his tired mind, and he could almost imagine soft snores across the room. He stays like that as long as he can, dozing off for a few more minutes. For as long as he stays asleep, everything is okay. With his eyes closed, the world is as it should be.

When sleep finally betrays and leaves him, he wastes no time getting dressed and leaving the room. There’s no use being in there any longer than he has to.

The feeling that he’s leaving something important behind follows him the rest of the day.

After he makes himself breakfast, Tubbo fixes a bowl of soup for Techno. Everyone else is gone; Phil and Wilbur have both left, and not just to the Dollar General or something. There’s a note on the fridge and a text in their group chat.

*(11:17) dadza: Wilbur and I are doing a grocery run. We’ll be back in an hour or two.*

Tubbo’s not supposed to leave Techno home alone, and he wouldn’t anyway. The guy’s still sick, even if he’s a lot more lucid than he has been. The thing Tubbo’s annoyed about is that he told Ranboo they’d meet at noon, and it’s going to be way past that before Phil and Wilbur are home.

Oh well. Ranboo can just... hang out here. For an hour or two. With Tubbo and his sick older brother.

Yeah. That’s fine.

Tubbo opens a can of chicken noodle soup and dumps it into a bowl, shoving it in the microwave. He doesn't have the time or patience to put any more effort into food preparation than this, and Techno's probably still too sick to tell the difference anyway. When he takes it out of the microwave, the bowl's hot enough to burn his fingers. He leaves it on the counter another minute longer, and then carries it upstairs, abandoning any caution to keep it from spilling in favor of getting up to Techno's room as quickly as possible.

When he opens the door, Techno is scrolling through his phone, propped up on pillows and glasses perched on the edge of his nose. He looks up as Tubbo walks in, and there are dark circles still bruised into the skin under his eyes. Those might be a permanent accessory at this point.

"I made soup," Tubbo declares. Techno offers a faint smile.

"Thanks," Techno says. His voice is hoarse as shit. Tubbo hands over the bowl with a warning about it being hot.

There's quiet after that. Tubbo sinks into the chair that's stayed at Techno's bedside the last two days, inhabited by a rotation of Phil, Wilbur, and himself. Mostly Phil.

It's nice to see Techno awake, though. *Really* awake, not semi-conscious and rambling to himself about things Tubbo couldn't understand. The delirious rambling was still better than the first moments, though, when he'd been crying. Techno doesn't cry in front of anyone, and seeing him break down, even while sick, felt wrong. Like Tubbo was seeing something he wasn't supposed to see.

The memory of Techno sobbing on the bathroom floor still clings to him. The way he'd keep calling for Tommy in his sleep haunts him a little too.

"Do you remember any of your dreams?" Tubbo asks abruptly. Techno winces. "You said a lot of fucking weird shit while you were out."

Techno blows on a spoonful of broth. "Not any good ones. Sorry."

Okay. That's probably to be expected.

"I have a friend coming over soon," Tubbo says. "Ranboo."

"Oh. That's nice." Techno blows on his soup again. "Are you gonna go somewhere?"

"Not until Phil's back," Tubbo says. "Don't worry, you're stuck with me."

"You don't have to babysit," Techno says. He reaches out to set his barely-touched bowl of soup on the nightstand, but his hands are so shaky that Tubbo grabs it from him before it can spill. "I'll live for an hour on my own."

"Nah. We can just hang out downstairs or something."

"It really would be fine, Tubbo."

“No.” Tubbo moves onto the bed beside Techno, crowding beside him. Techno immediately shifts to make room for him without a moment of argument. “Play dumb memes on your phone. I wanna laugh.”

Techno gives up arguing.

Tubbo ends up leaning against Techno’s shoulder watching videos on the tiny screen propped up on Techno’s lap. When the doorbell rings, Techno’s eyes are already half-closed.

“See you,” Techno mumbles as Tubbo gets to his feet.

“I’ll be downstairs,” Tubbo says. “Text if you need me.”

Techno makes a half-asleep noise of agreement. Tubbo eases the bedroom door shut behind him and makes his way downstairs.

At the front door, Ranboo greets him with a smile. “Hi. Sorry, I’m a little early.”

“Wouldn’t be you if you weren’t,” Tubbo says. He steps aside to let Ranboo through the door. “I hope you don’t mind if we just hang out here for a little while. It’s just me and my brother at home now, and he’s sick, so I shouldn’t leave him alone until my dad gets back.”

“That’s fine!” Ranboo says quickly. “Your brother—that one’s...” Ranboo trails off, clearly trying to remember a name.

“Techno,” Tubbo supplies.

“Techno,” Ranboo echoes. “Right. So you’re Tubbo, and then there’s Tommy and Techno? You all have a T name. That’s my trick for remembering.”

“More or less.” Tubbo leads Ranboo into the living room, already looking around for something to do to pass the time.

“Are there more than that? How many siblings do you have?”

Tubbo stops to look back at him. “That’s a complicated question. Do you want the answer based on legally, biologically, or if we actually, like, act like it?”

Ranboo blinks. “Oh. Um, whichever? I’m sorry, I didn’t know it would be a sensitive topic, you don’t have to answer.”

“It’s okay,” Tubbo says. “There’s also Wilbur. He doesn’t usually live here.”

“Oh,” Ranboo says again. He sounds like he doesn’t know how else to respond. Tubbo can’t fault him for that.

“So,” Tubbo says abruptly, changing the subject before it can get more awkward than it already is. “I’m thinking today, we just start out on my street to ask everyone what they were doing Wednesday night and what they saw. We can work outwards from there.”

He pulls out the list of names he's kept tucked safely into his backpack, pointing out all the names he's circled, marking them as residents of the same street they live on. The same street Tommy went missing on.

It itches inside of him sometimes, thinking about that. Tommy's phone was so close to their front door. If Tubbo had just looked out his window, he might've seen—

He cuts that thought off before it can go any further. He might not have looked out his window at the right time, but maybe someone else did. Someone else *had to* have seen something. And if they did, Tubbo's going to find out what it was.

Ranboo sits with him on the living room floor for the next hour, going over the list and formulating the best questions to ask. He's shed his familiar corduroy jacket, sleeves tied around his waist, to reveal a worn t-shirt with graphics for some band Tubbo hasn't listened to. There's a stain on one sleeve, just above the hem, and whenever he's focused on the papers in front of him, Ranboo absent-mindedly picks at where the stain is.

As soon as he hears the front door open, Tubbo immediately scrambles to gather up the papers spread across the living room floor. He shoves them back in his backpack right as Wilbur's voice echoes from the kitchen.

"We're home, Tubbo," Wilbur calls, not quite yelling and quiet enough that his voice won't carry upstairs to wake Techno, but loud enough that Tubbo would hear him from anywhere downstairs.

"Cool," Tubbo calls back, then looks at Ranboo and lowers the volume of his voice. "Our story is that we're going to McDonalds, okay?"

"Sure." Ranboo nods. Tubbo gets to his feet and reaches a hand down to pull Ranboo up after him. As he does, Phil peeks around the corner from the kitchen. For a second, there's a look of surprise on his face, but it disappears in a moment.

"I thought I heard another voice in here," he says cheerily. "Didn't know you had a friend over, Tubbo."

"This is Ranboo," Tubbo says. "We were gonna meet at McDonalds but since I was home with Techno, he just came here."

"Hello," Ranboo says. "I hope it's okay that I'm here, next time I can—"

Phil cuts him off with a wave of his hand. "You're welcome here any time, Ranboo. It's nice to meet you."

Ranboo picks at the stain on his sleeve. "Nice to meet you too, Mr... uh..."

"Just Phil is fine," Phil tells him. "Nobody in this house is formal, no need for the mister shit."

Tubbo grabs Ranboo's arm and starts guiding him to the door. "Okay. Techno ate a little bit of soup and then fell asleep, but otherwise he was fine. We're going to McDonalds now that

you're back."

"Walk safely, it looks like it's going to rain again," Phil says, at the same time Wilbur calls from the kitchen, "Do you want me to drive you?"

"No!" Tubbo says loudly, all but dragging Ranboo out the front door. "We'll be back later, bye!"

"Make sure your phone is turned—"

Tubbo slams the front door before Phil finishes the thought. He turns around to look at Ranboo with a sigh, finally releasing his arm. Ranboo takes the opportunity to untie his jacket sleeves and put it back on.

"Sorry," Tubbo says. "They're overbearing."

"They seemed nice to me," Ranboo says.

"Phil's nice." Tubbo shrugs. "Wilbur's... Well, Wilbur's Wilbur. But they're both also overbearing."

Ranboo just nods. There's a thoughtful look in his eyes. Tubbo has a brief thought that maybe he shouldn't complain about overbearing family if Ranboo's really got parents who barely let him outside. Although, based on the number of times Tubbo's seen him the past few days, he's not sure that's entirely true.

There's a lot about Ranboo that doesn't add up, but who is Tubbo to really complain about someone keeping secrets?

The sky is grey and cloudy. Phil's warning about rain looks about right, and Tubbo grumbles under his breath. They could've had a whole extra hour out here if it weren't for having to stay in...

"Okay, we're gonna have to move quick." Tubbo digs his papers and a pen from his backpack. "We don't have a lot of time before the rain starts, and we have to get away from the house before Phil or Wilbur look out the window and see what we're doing."

"Should we start further down the street?" Ranboo suggests, and Tubbo nods.

"Good idea. Let's do that. We'll start towards that end and keep working our way down, then cross the street and go to the other side." Tubbo points to one end of the street, and then sets off on a quick walk. Ranboo trails along behind him.

The first house they stop at has an empty driveway and dark windows. Tubbo knocks on the door three times before giving up and moving to the next one. At that stop, a little kid answers the door and stares wordlessly up at them.

"Uh, hi," Tubbo says. "Is one of your parents home?"

The kid just stares.



Tubbo glances back at Ranboo, who just shrugs. He looks at the kid and tries again. “Is someone else home with you? Can I talk to your mom or dad?”

He’s sure the kid is just going to keep staring at him when another voice is heard further into the house.

“—don’t open the door!” The kid is whisked away from the door as a woman with the same shade of blonde hair herds them back.

“Hi,” Tubbo says quickly. “We’re—”

“Sorry, I’m not interested,” she says with a false-apologetic smile, door already closing.

“No, no we’re not—”

And then the door is closed and Tubbo is talking to empty space. Frustration bubbles in his chest, hot and acidic, right beside that uncomfortably *lost* feeling he’s been carrying all week.

Tubbo swears under his breath. “Fuck this shit. Do I knock again?”

“I don’t know,” Ranboo says. “She seemed kind of busy.”

Tubbo stares at the door a moment longer, then sighs and turns around. “Okay. I’ll come back to this one when I go back to that other house too.”

At the third door, an older man tries to give them canned food before Tubbo explains they’re not collecting anything. He finally asks if he’d seen anything the night Tommy went missing, and the man tells Tubbo he’d been in bed by nine o’clock. He then added on a lecture on how important an early bedtime is, telling Tubbo and Ranboo how they’re “*young now and can handle staying up late but as soon as you get old, you’ll have to sleep more—*”

When Tubbo finally manages to excuse both of them from the conversation, they’ve lost five precious minutes of time before the rain starts. That frustration keeps simmering inside of him.

“Maybe we should split up,” Tubbo says as they step off the porch on the way to the next house. “That might go a little faster.”

“Oh,” Ranboo says. “Uh, okay. I can—yeah, I’m sure that’ll be fine.”

“If you don’t want to, we can stick together,” Tubbo says.

“No, no it’s all good!” Ranboo says quickly. “I can handle it. You’re right, it’ll be faster if we split up, so I’ll just... go across the street and start there?”

“Yell if you need me,” Tubbo says. Ranboo nods and jogs across the street.

The next few houses go by in a disappointing, frustrating blur. The people who do answer the door have little information to give - they weren’t home then, or they were in bed, or they just didn’t see anything. Tubbo wants to scream. Ranboo doesn’t seem to be having any luck

across the street either. The clouds in the sky grow heavier and angrier along with the frustration itching under Tubbo's skin.

Tubbo walks onto the porch of the next house, scratching off another name as he does. When he reaches out a hand to knock on the door, he sees something that makes him freeze in place.

This house has a doorbell, and just above it, a little camera.

They have a camera. It's facing the street. He *needs that footage*.

He rings the doorbell, and then he rings it again, pressing the button over and over as rapidly as he can. Faintly, he hears a crash inside and then a muffled voice.

"Jesus Christ! I'm coming, holy shit, hang on."

Tubbo lets go of the button as a chain lock rattles and then the door cracks open. Through the opening he sees a tired-looking man, dressed in a bathrobe and blue slippers.

"...Tubbo? What the fuck do you want?"

"Hi Connor," Tubbo says. "How long do you keep your doorbell cam footage?"

Connor stares at him. "Uh... I don't know. Why?"

"I need it." Tubbo nudges the door with his foot. "Can I come in? How long would it take you to get whatever you have for Wednesday night?"

"Is this about Tommy?"

"Yes."

For another moment, Connor just studies him. Then he lets out a sigh and opens the door wider. "All right, come in and I'll see what I can do. Don't let the cat out."

Tubbo turns around and cups his hands around his mouth, shouting Ranboo's name until the taller boy hears him. Ranboo gives him a quizzical look, head tilted, and then jogs back across the street.

"What's up?" he asks.

"Connor has a camera," Tubbo says. "He's gonna show us whatever it caught on Wednesday."

"If I still have it," Connor interjects. "Can you *please* come in and close the door, I have a kitten and if he runs out, I'm making you two chase him back in."

"We're going," Tubbo says, stepping through the door with Ranboo following behind. Connor shuts the door behind them and gestures vaguely into the rest of his house.

“Make yourself at home or whatever,” he says. “I have to pull up the footage on the computer, it’ll take me a minute to remember how.”

Rather than make themselves at home, however, Ranboo and Tubbo stand uncomfortably where Connor leaves them. Tubbo glances around, realizing he’s not sure he’s ever been inside of this house before.

“Do you know him?” Ranboo asks quietly. Tubbo nods.

“Yeah. Well, I don’t *know* him, but I see him out on his porch a lot and I think he knows Phil? He’s lived here for ages, longer than I’ve lived on this street at least. He’s fine. His cat’s cute.”

On cue, a little grey and white kitten makes its way out from behind a couch and trots over to Ranboo’s legs, sniffing curiously before winding between his ankles.

“Oh!” Ranboo immediately crouches, offering his fingers to the tiny thing to sniff. “Hello there. You *are* very cute.”

Tubbo watches Ranboo coo over the kitten for a few minutes until Connor shouts from the next room.

“Got it! Tubbo, get in here.”

Tubbo’s heart is in his throat. This is the closest he’s gotten to learning *anything*, and he’s almost afraid to see what Connor’s camera has to show him.

Connor leans back in his chair as Tubbo walks in, gesturing to the screen. “This is what I’ve got. There’s no sound, just visual, and it’s blurry as shit, especially at night. Knock yourself out.”

Tubbo swaps places with Connor, dropping into the desk chair and honing in on the screen. He skips through the hours-long video, keeping an eye on the timestamp in the corner until it hits 10:00. 10:05 is when he texted Techno back. Provided he walked down this end of the street...

There. Tommy, with his shoulders hunched, wearing that hoodie he’d grabbed on his way out and pajama pants with sneakers.

Tubbo’s chest hurts. His throat aches and that itching beneath his skin scratches away at him. Tommy’s right there.

And then he’s gone, walking out of range of Connor’s camera.

“Shit,” Tubbo whispers. And then, louder, “Okay. So we know he walked down this way. And he presumably had his phone on him still, because he wouldn’t have just left it to lay on the ground and kept going. So if we skip ahead...”

Tubbo keeps skimming the video, ten seconds at a time, with his breath stuck in his throat. Ranboo nearly leans over his shoulder, Connor’s kitten in his arms, while Connor hovers on

the other side.

He keeps skipping ahead. Ten seconds. Another ten. Ten seconds more. Skip, skip, *skip* .

“There,” Ranboo blurts out, pointing at the screen. Tubbo freezes the video instantly, and sure enough, just at the edge of the frame is Tommy’s hoodie. Tubbo backs up the video frame by frame until his brother is entirely visible again, and notes the timestamp.

10:19. Barely twenty minutes after he’d left the house.

“Okay.” Tubbo blows out a long, steady breath. “I was right. It was on his way home.”

It feels so strange to see Tommy on this screen. To see him standing on the sidewalk just outside Connor’s house, only a few blocks from his own home. Tubbo wishes he could reach into the frame, shout through the screen, tell Tommy to *run* home, to call him, to call Techno, to do *something* to keep himself safe. He wishes he could talk to the Tommy in this video, reach out and hold his shoulders and ask him what happened, where he went, what should Tubbo be looking for...

Tubbo presses play and lets the video play out again. Tommy walks off frame. A car drives by, and a minute later, so does another. It’s too blurry to make out license plates, and almost too blurry to even make out what kind of vehicle he’s looking at.

He lets the video play for another ten minutes, eyes glued to the screen the entire time. Connor walks away after a few minutes and comes back with a drink. Ranboo gets distracted by the kitten a few times, leaving to play with it over in the corner. Tubbo barely registers the movement.

“I don’t think you’re gonna see anything else,” Connor says finally. “He’d already have long since gotten to your door.”

Tubbo pauses the video and just stares at the screen a few moments longer. He backs the video up a few minutes, then starts skipping back ten seconds at a time, studying every car that drives by the street. He doesn’t recognize any of them, and it’s so blurry that he doesn’t think this is going to do any good, but there might be *something*...

He keeps going back until Tommy walks backwards across frame, and then he backs up even further. He makes mental notes of any vehicles that might be suspicious, or might be familiar, or might be...

“I know that car,” he says abruptly, pointing to the one driving across the frame.

“That’s before Tommy even walked past my house, though,” Connor says. “How’s that gonna help?”

“I can’t see shit on this video,” Tubbo says, “but he was there around the same time Tommy was on the street. He might’ve seen something with his own eyes.”

Tubbo gets to his feet, then glances at Connor. His eyes swim a little from so long looking at a screen. “Can I have a copy of that video?”

“Yeah, sure. Hang on.” Connor sits down and pulls a thumb drive out from a drawer, then copies the video file onto it and hands it over to Tubbo.

“Thanks,” Tubbo says. “Really. Thank you, Connor. This is really, really helpful.”

“Good luck finding him,” Connor says. “Now leave so I can make dinner. And put my cat down so he doesn’t go with you.”

“Right. Sorry.” Ranboo sets the kitten on the floor. His t-shirt is covered in grey hairs. “Um, nice to meet you, Connor.”

“Nice to meet you too, whatever your name is,” Connor says.

“Ranboo,” Ranboo says.

“Didn’t ask,” Connor says.

Back outside, Tubbo sets off in a near-sprint down the street. Ranboo jogs to keep up with him.

“That was really helpful,” Ranboo says. “I think your plan is working.”

“Maybe,” Tubbo says. “I didn’t actually learn anything I didn’t already know, but maybe it’s gonna lead somewhere.”

“You said you recognized the car,” Ranboo says. “What car is it?”

Tubbo points at a driveway across the street where a familiar car is parked in front of an open garage door. “That one. And I *really* know the owner. C’mon.”

Ranboo follows him across the street and up to the front door. Tubbo glances up at the sky; it’s gonna rain any minute at this point, so this might be their last stop for the day. Hopefully it’s good enough to be worth it.

He knocks twice on the door and then waits. As soon as the door begins to open, he’s hit with the smell of freshly-baked cookies and a wide smile.

“Tubbo!” Bad says delightedly. “It’s so nice to see you, what brings you here? Oh, who’s your friend?”

“Hi Bad,” Tubbo says. “This is Ranboo. Do you have time to talk? I wanted to ask you something.”

“Of course.” Bad opens the door wider. “Do you want to come in? I just made cookies, they’re still warm. And it looks like it’s about to pour, I don’t want you two to get caught out in it.”

Tubbo accepts the offer and steps inside, followed closely by Ranboo. The inside of Bad’s house is familiar, though Tubbo hasn’t spent too much time inside of it. He knows Tommy spent more time here; Bad used to babysit him when they were all younger and Phil worked

late hours. There's marks of Tubbo's brothers here, in the cozy, homey decorations with photos hung on nearly every available wall space. There's *plenty* of Sapnap, and some featuring most of the other kids in town too. It's odd to see a young, brown-haired Techno in one, eyeing the camera suspiciously beside a beaming Sapnap and Wilbur. In the next photo, Tommy, who couldn't have been more than six, sits on Bad's living room floor coloring beside Sapnap. It's a sweet photo, and it makes the hurt in Tubbo's chest all the stronger.

Tubbo tears himself away from the photos and into the kitchen, where Bad busies himself putting together a plate of cookies and glasses of milk. Ranboo's somehow gotten here ahead of him, jacket tied around his waist again and sitting at a barstool at Bad's kitchen island and chatting as if he's known Bad his whole life.

"...can't believe I don't know your parents," Bad is saying. "I'm sure I had to have run into them sometime. Where do they work, if I may ask?"

"They mostly work online," Ranboo says. "Freelance stuff. We're all kind of homebodies, you know, just hang out with each other instead of going out."

"Ahh, I get it," Bad says, nodding sagely. Tubbo knows for a fact that Bad does *not* get it and is extremely social. "When Sapnap still lived at home, all I'd wanna do is spend time with him, so I completely understand your parents. Family is very important!"

Tubbo drops his backpack onto the floor loudly and climbs up onto the stool beside Ranboo. "Bad, when did you get home on Wednesday night last week?"

Bad blinks at him. He sets the plate of cookies in his hand down on the counter, sliding it towards the two of them. "Well, let's see. I had to run out pretty late and grab some things from the store at the last minute, I just barely made it to the Dollar General before they closed! So it was probably a bit after ten?"

Tubbo nods. "Okay. So did you see Tommy while you were out?"

There's a heavy silence after that. Something falls over Bad's face, a sort of sadness that twists uncomfortable inside of Tubbo.

"No," Bad says gently. "I didn't see him. I'm sorry, Tubbo, but you know if I had, I would've gone to your dad the moment I heard he was missing."

"Are you *sure*?" Tubbo presses. "I saw video footage of when he was out for a walk, and I saw your car drive by at one point."

"I must have been on my way home then." Bad leans back against the counter. "But I didn't see Tommy at all. Could he have been walking on a different street at the time you saw my car?"

Tubbo rubs his temples. Bad had to have seen something. He *had to*. This can't be a dead end.

“I don’t know, it was pretty close,” Tubbo says, and he knows his frustration and anger is bleeding into his voice now, words snapping like sparks off his tongue. Everything is boiling and itching and scratching at his insides, and he *can’t be this close to losing Tommy again*—

“Tubbo,” Bad says, tone still quiet and gentle. “I’m really, really sorry. I wish I’d looked harder or seen where he went, or got home a little earlier or a little later, or *something*, I wish I’d seen him—”

“What about anything suspicious?” Tubbo presses. “Any cars that looked weird, or—or someone else walking around, or... or...”

Bad looks at him sadly, and that sadness just *screams* inside of Tubbo. “Nothing like that. I’m sorry.”

Tubbo’s blood rushes in his ears. He feels like he’s locked in place, everything loud in his head, under his skin, in his chest. There are pictures of Tommy on the wall behind him and there’s a video of Tommy on the flash drive in his backpack and *nobody has seen him in a week*, it’s been a week and Tubbo has no idea where he is. He hasn’t ever gone an entire week without talking to Tommy, to his brother, to the *best friend he’s ever had*, and now he doesn’t even know where he is and every time he gets close to finding something it’s just ripped away from him. He wants to scream, he wants to cry, he wants to beg Bad to please know something, to have seen something, to give him something to learn from - he can’t leave empty-handed, he needs *something*...

“Fuck,” Tubbo whispers, and Bad doesn’t even correct his language. Tears sting his eyes. “Fuck. God, okay—I—I—”

It’s scratching inside of him, clawing at him, and he needs to go. He needs to get out of here.

He’s up on his feet and out the door before he registers someone calling his name, Ranboo, or Bad, or maybe both, but he doesn’t stop. He’s going to break down entirely if he stays a moment longer and he doesn’t want to do that in Bad’s kitchen.

So he runs. He runs out the front door and down the porch and down the sidewalk, and he doesn’t even care where he’s going now but he just *runs*. He scrubs at his eyes as his breath hitches in his chest and everything is *so much*.

He doesn’t know where Tommy is. He doesn’t know who took him, he doesn’t know what’s happened to him. No matter how hard Tubbo tries, he might never find out.

And it was right outside his fucking window. If he’d just looked outside, he could’ve stopped it from happening. If he hadn’t just fucking fallen asleep—

He just fell asleep. They’d had an argument and he just went to bed angry, and he *hates* going to bed angry, he’s always hated being upset with Tommy but he let himself be bitter and angry anyway and now this is what he’s left with.

Tommy’s gone and Tubbo never even got to say sorry. The last thing he ever told him was an angry insult. The last words they exchanged weren’t an expression of love, or a reminder of

their friendship, an inside joke, a smile, *anything* to be a fair goodbye.

It was an insult and a shout. And now he can't take it back.

He can't do this. He can't *fucking do this*.

He's on his knees now, and he can't stop tears from running down his face. A sob shakes his chest, and then another, and *god* they hurt coming out. They sting and ache and he feels like he's falling apart at the seams, but they keep going. He sobs, loud and ugly and arms wrapped around himself and eyes squeezed shut and he can barely breathe.

"I'm sorry," he gasps between sobs, as if Tommy could hear him. As if his brother could hear this belated apology that means more than anything Tubbo has ever said aloud before. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—I never meant it, I'm *sorry!*"

As these sobs claw their way out of his chest, he gradually becomes aware of two things.

The first is a voice, quiet and gentle at his side. They're murmuring repetitive soothing words, *you're okay* and *it's all right* on loop, and it's absolutely lies, but it catches his attention and that's enough to calm some of the raging emotion in his chest.

The other thing he becomes aware of is rain pouring all over him.

"Fuck," Tubbo whispers, shuddering a sobbing breath.

"It's okay," Ranboo says, crouched beside him in the grass. "Are you all right?"

"I dunno," Tubbo mumbles, scrubbing a hand over his eyes, though he's not sure what that's supposed to accomplish, given the amount of water running down his head and face. He's soaked, and Ranboo is too, and now that he looks at him, he realizes Ranboo isn't even wearing his corduroy jacket. It's wrapped around something instead - oh. It's Tubbo's backpack. He's trying to keep it dry and protect all the papers and shit inside.

Another sob tears it's way out of Tubbo's chest. "What the hell, man," he says around it. "Why are you so *good?*"

Ranboo just looks at him in confusion. "What?"

Tubbo shakes his head and gets to his, rubbing his eyes again. "Fuck. Nothing. Never mind. God, fucking—"

Ranboo gets to his feet too. He holds the jacket-wrapped backpack close to his chest, an extra layer of shielding from the rain. Tubbo looks around, taking a moment to figure out where he's dragged them off to this time.

He ran the opposite direction of the house, and he'd gotten farther than he'd even realized, down to another street that's just as familiar to him. This is one he's walked a thousand times too. So close to another place he'd called home, once.



“Shit,” Tubbo says, and he immediately sets off with Ranboo at his heels. “Okay, we gotta get out of this rain, fuck—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have run off. I know where we can hole up until this stops.”

“I don’t know if it’s gonna stop,” Ranboo admits. “It’s coming down pretty hard.”

Tubbo grimaces. He crosses through someone’s yard to get to the back of another property, overgrown and fenced off. There’s some trees here that protect them from the worst of the rain, bringing it down to just a cold sprinkle instead.

They’re very close to the woods. This house was always far too close to them. It wasn’t a problem when they were younger, when he and Tommy would explore them and build forts out of fallen logs and craft walking sticks from branches. It was only a problem years later, when the sight of the trees started to make Tubbo sick to his stomach.

“In here,” Tubbo says, hopping the fence and motioning for Ranboo to follow. He looks hesitant for only a moment before following Tubbo.

“Who’s house is this?” he asks nervously. “Are they okay with us being here?”

“Nobody lives here,” Tubbo says. “Nobody’s lived here for years. Don’t worry about it.”

He leads Ranboo to the shed in the backyard with grimy windows and a door with wood planks starting to rot. It’s locked. Tubbo backs up and then gives a running kick to the door until it gives. The whole thing falls inward with a crash.

“Uh,” Ranboo says. “That’s... is that legal?”

“I do not give a shit,” Tubbo says. He steps into the shed. “You want out of the rain or not?”

Ranboo follows him in.

There’s old garden equipment in here, left untouched for years. An old table too, piled with mildewing newspaper and a radio that barely worked even when they *had* lived here.

Tubbo’s heart is beating a little too quickly. But his face is drying now, and his chest doesn’t hurt quite so badly.

“Tubbo,” Ranboo says, still sounding nervous. “Are you sure it’s okay for us to be here?”

Tubbo eyes him. He turns the truth over in his head. He thinks about testing it out on his tongue, too.

“Yeah,” he says. “Ranboo, there’s nobody here to tell us to leave. Nobody lives here.”

Ranboo doesn’t look entirely convinced. His mask is soaked and sticks to his face every time he breathes in. Tubbo’s pretty sure that’s dangerous. He makes a mental note to start keeping an extra mask in his backpack along with the hair ties he keeps for Techno.

“You asked me earlier how many siblings I had,” Tubbo says abruptly.

Ranboo blinks. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t answer,” Tubbo says, “because I told you the answer is complicated. And that was a lie. It’s not really that complicated. The answer is four.”

“Four?” Ranboo echoes. “Tommy, Techno, Wilbur...?”

“And Quackity,” Tubbo says. “We used to live here. This is our old house, me and Quackity and my dad and his mom. We lived here until we couldn’t anymore and then I lived with Tommy and Phil and them, and Quackity left.”

Ranboo says quietly, “Oh. Why... Why did he leave?”

Tubbo’s shaking, from the cold, from the ache in his chest, from the truth he’s letting Ranboo see, from all of it, he doesn’t know. “Because that’s just what happens. People aren’t allowed to care about me, Ranboo. And I’m not allowed to care about them, because if I do, they leave. They either get up and go, or something takes them away, because I’m not allowed to keep hold of *anyone*.”

There are tears on his face again, but this time he doesn’t try to wipe them away. Ranboo’s eyes are sad.

“I’m really sorry,” he says quietly. “That’s—that’s really awful, I’m sorry, Tubbo.”

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this,” Tubbo tells him. “Maybe to warn you. Y’know, let you know what you’re getting yourself into. Maybe you just wanna stop before you have to leave too.”

“I’m not going to leave,” Ranboo says. “Tubbo, I know we’ve just met like, four days ago, but I care about you. You’re a good friend. I’m not going to just leave.”

“You might not get a choice,” Tubbo says with a bitter laugh. “Tommy didn’t.”

The laugh turns into another sob. He’s really not allowed to keep anyone he loves, is he?

Ranboo tilts his head a little, and then he sets the jacket-wrapped backpack on the table, on top of a stack of newspaper. “Do you want a hug? You look like you need one.”

Tubbo scrubs at his face. He doesn’t normally like hugs, but Ranboo is standing there with his arms open and for some reason, it doesn’t feel like a bad idea. “Um. Yeah. Okay.”

It’s awkward and cold for a moment, Tubbo shuffling forward and Ranboo wrapping his arms around his shoulders, and then somehow, it’s not awkward anymore. Ranboo’s heartbeat is just under Tubbo’s ear, and his arms are a steady pressure against his back, and then Tubbo is sniffling back tears again. At least Ranboo’s shirt is already so damp that it won’t make a difference.

They don’t say anything, just stand there for a moment with Tubbo holding back tears and listening to Ranboo’s heartbeat and slightly wheezy breaths steadily above him.

“You sound like you’re dying,” Tubbo mumbles. “Can you even breathe with the mask that wet?”

“It’s actually kind of difficult,” Ranboo admits.

“Take it off,” Tubbo says, releasing his hold on Ranboo and stepping back. “I won’t look. Just don’t suffocate yourself.”

Ranboo hesitates, and then he reaches up. Tubbo starts to turn away.

“Wait,” Ranboo says. “You—You can look. Just... I mean, it only feels fair, right? You’ve told me, um, a lot about yourself today, and I feel like... you know. I should be a little vulnerable with you too.”

Tubbo blinks. “You don’t have to if you’re not comfortable with it, Ranboo. I genuinely don’t mind.”

“I want to,” Ranboo insists. “Can I just, um, can you—can you promise not to ask what happened? That’s all. Just not that question.”

A combination of curiosity and concern twist his stomach all at once. “Of course.”

Ranboo nods, and then he unhooks the mask from around his ears.

Tubbo understands instantly why he wears it. And immediately, he wants to ask the very question Ranboo had made off limits, but he keeps his mouth shut instead.

An angry red scar webs its way across half of Ranboo’s face, from his jaw across his cheek and stretching over his nose and lips. It’s not a solid patch of scarring, but thin lines instead, criss-crossed over each other and fractaling outwards. Tubbo has no idea what could’ve made an injury like that.

“Oh,” Tubbo says. “Shit. That looks like it hurt.”

“It did,” Ranboo says quietly.

“Sorry,” Tubbo says quickly. “That was insensitive. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” Ranboo fidgets with the edge of his mask. “I don’t mind. Just not—you know. The one question.”

“Right,” Tubbo says. “Then, can I just—I just want to ask if it’s okay, I just want to make sure, it’s not—it wasn’t your parents, was it?”

Ranboo shakes his head immediately. “No, no no no. No, it wasn’t them, don’t worry. It wasn’t anything like that.”

“Okay.” There’s a weight of relief off of Tubbo’s shoulders. “Okay, good. Good. As long as you’re not in danger anymore.”

Ranboo offers a smile. It's the first time Tubbo's gotten to see his smile, he realizes. It's a nice one. "I'm okay. Thanks for looking out for me."

"It's only fair," Tubbo says. "You did follow me out into a rainstorm after I ran away sobbing, and even had the thought to cover my backpack with your jacket so it wouldn't get completely soaked, so like. We're even, I guess. I still can't believe you did that. How *are* you so nice all the time?"

Ranboo smiles sheepishly. "I dunno, I just knew there was important stuff in there. It's not that big of a deal."

"It is to me." Tubbo shakes his head. "Why do you spend so much time around me? You're way too nice. You should find better friends."

"But I like being your friend," Ranboo says. "I, uh, don't really know a lot of people anyway. So."

"Oh, so you're just friends with me because I'm the only option," Tubbo teases. "Got it. Way to make a guy feel special."

"Yep," Ranboo says. "No other reason. Just that I don't go outside and I don't know anyone else to be friends with. As soon as I meet anyone else, I'll be friends with them instead."

"You're so full of shit," Tubbo says, and Ranboo grins. "Not just about the friends thing either. You keep saying you never go outside, and then you've hung out with me on three different occasions in less than a week. Four if you count meeting you in McDonalds."

Ranboo's face falls. "Oh. Uh, well, I just... You know, I have a reason to go outside when I have plans with you, so..."

Without the mask on, Tubbo realizes that Ranboo is an *extremely* bad liar. He looks even more nervous than the baseline of anxiety that's normal for him.

It's an incredibly odd feeling, to know that Ranboo's been vulnerable enough with him to show him the scars under his mask, but is still lying to him about *something*.

"Ranboo," Tubbo says abruptly. "I get it if you don't want to tell me things. That's fine. You're allowed to keep shit to yourself. I do too. I'm not gonna call you out on every little thing you don't explain to me about yourself."

Ranboo watches him speak, silent and with a look almost like fear in his eyes.

"But I *do* know you're lying to me. And it's a little unsettling, if I'm being honest."

Ranboo fidgets with his mask again. "Sorry."

And that's all he says. Tubbo waits a moment, and then another, and Ranboo says nothing else. He won't make eye contact either, gaze fixed on the floor.

Tubbo kicks himself internally. They'd had a nice moment going on, and now it's gone, replaced by an awkward silence that Tubbo can't bridge. He doesn't know how. And Ranboo isn't offering anything else.

This is going to be an awkward wait for the rain to let up if it lasts any longer.

Tubbo glances out the permanently open door of the shed at the rain still coming down in buckets. Shit. "I'm gonna be honest, boss man, I think we're gonna be stuck here all night if we're waiting for the rain to let up."

"I think you might be right," Ranboo agrees. Tubbo lets out a long sigh.

"I hate that I'm doing this," he grumbles, and then rummages through his backpack until he finds his phone.

*(4:18) tubbo: can you pick us up. it is raining*

*(4:18) tubbo: also we're not at mcdonalds*

*(4:19) wilbur: where?*

*(4:19) tubbo: old house*

*(4:20) wilbur: old house???*

*(4:20) wilbur: on my way. are you okay? should i bring dad?*

*(4:21) tubbo: fine. don't bring phil. i'll explain when you get here.*

*(4:21) wilbur: okay. be there soon and be careful.*

*(4:21) tubbo: you know me. the most careful guy around*

*(4:22) tubbo: thanks wilbur*

## Chapter End Notes

more fanart! here's the twins:

<https://whosthisnerd.tumblr.com/post/658833935752658944/my-friend-got-me-into-the-fanfic-called-devils>

thank you for reading!! hope you have a wonderful weekend! <3

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

There's a few side effects Techno's still getting over. The dizziness is one, and the fact he still can't stay standing for too long. Those are both annoying, but considering he's only been out of bed since this afternoon, he's not too surprised by it. What's worse - the one thing he really wishes he would've left behind in the feverish delirium of the past two days - is that every time he's alone in a quiet room, he could swear he hears someone whispering behind him.

## Chapter Notes

wednesday update woo!! we've got a shorter chapter this time, and another shorter one on sunday too, because i think they'll work better split up than put together into one chapter. also because i'm impatient and crave constant validation.

i'm really not sure if this chapter needs any sort of warning for techno's "voices" (unreality? maybe?) but it's nothing too severe. this is more of a breather/filler chapter than anything! there's definitely still stuff to pick up on though :3 hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The front door bursts open with a flurry of noise and a shower of water. Techno glances up from his seat at the kitchen table and peers down the short hallway to the door. He watches as Wilbur ushers in two others - Tubbo, and another person Techno hasn't seen before. Ranboo, he assumes. Wilbur fights the door closed against the wind blowing more rain over the doorstep.

They're all dripping wet, shedding soaked jackets in the hall. Techno pushes back his chair with a creak, catching Wilbur's attention.

"What are you doing up?" Wilbur asks, at the same time that Techno says, "You guys want towels?"

"I'll get it," Wilbur says. He kicks his shoes off at the doormat and then squeezes past Techno in the hall. "You stay here."

"I'm capable of walking," Techno says, voice clipped with annoyance, but he gives up and turns back to Tubbo and his friend. "Ranboo, right?"

“Right.” The kid’s tall, taller than Wilbur, Techno thinks. He’s got light hair plastered against his head and face with the rain, and a mask over his face. And he’s far from dressed appropriately for this weather, a soaked and thin t-shirt and what looks like a jacket in his arms rather than over his shoulders. He’s got the soaked piece of fabric bundled up, holding it close against his chest in a way that’s almost protective. “You’re... Techno?”

“Got it in one. You want me to hang that up?” Techno holds out a hand.

“Oh, uh, sure,” Ranboo says, glancing down at his own hands. He unwraps the jacket from how it’s bundled in his arms, and then Techno sees Tubbo’s backpack hidden under it. Ranboo hands the backpack to Tubbo, and the jacket to Techno. “Tubbo said you were sick, I hope you feel better soon.”

Techno huffs. “Sick’s a dramatic word for it. Just wore myself out a bit, I’m fine. You two look like you’re more in danger of catchin’ something than I am, being out in the rain and cold. You didn’t even have a jacket on.”

He hangs the jacket in question on a coat hook in the hallway. Behind him, he feels Wilbur brush past, handing out towels to Tubbo and Ranboo. He drops one on the floor too, trying to soak up some of the water they’d brought in with them.

Ranboo’s face flushes, just barely visible over the edge of his mask. “I was using it for something else.”

“‘Cause he’s a dumbass,” Tubbo says. It’s the first time he’s spoken since they’ve gotten home, which strikes Techno as a little unusual. But his brother won’t make eye contact with him, focusing on toweling off his hair and pulling off his sopping wet hoodie.

Ranboo makes a noise of offense, but he doesn’t get a chance to argue. Wilbur starts directing them out of the hall.

“We don’t have to keep standing in the doorway, come on. Ranboo, do you want to borrow a change of clothes? I think we’d be around the same size.”

“Oh, I don’t want to be an inconvenience,” Ranboo starts to say, but Wilbur waves him off and begins to lead him through the house.

“It’s not. Here, I’ll show you the bathroom and grab clothes on the way, right upstairs—”

And then it’s just Tubbo and Techno left in the entryway to the kitchen. Tubbo continues to dry his hair intently. Techno clears his throat. He’s starting to feel a little shaky from all this standing, but he’s not about to admit that out loud.

“Ranboo seems nice,” Techno says. Tubbo shrugs.

“Yeah. He’s cool.” Tubbo drops the towel he’s using onto the floor, poking it around with his feet to mop up the remaining puddles. “Is Phil home?”

“Yeah. He’s on the phone.”

Which is a common occurrence for their father, especially recently. Techno honestly doesn't even know who else he's been able to find to call, but he's on the phone at least daily with the police station, and then the detectives specifically assigned to Tommy's case, and then with whoever's higher up from them, as well as any other number he can find. Techno thinks Phil's strategy might be to bother them so much they work harder to find Tommy just to get him to stop.

Techno's legs are starting to feel wobbly. He definitely needs to sit down again. A guy spends two days in bed and suddenly his limbs forget how to walk.

"Did Wilbur say anything when he left to pick us up?" Tubbo asks abruptly. Techno blinks and turns to look at him.

"Uh. No, he just said he was going to get you." There's something unreadable in Tubbo's expression. Techno frowns. "Why? Was there something he should've said?"

"No," Tubbo says. "I dunno. I'll tell you later. Just wanted to make sure Phil wasn't gonna freak out or anything."

That's concerning. Tubbo doesn't elaborate, though, and before Techno can give any sort of reply, the younger boy ducks past him and makes a beeline for the stairs, mumbling something about getting changed himself.

Techno drags himself back to the kitchen and drops into his chair again. The room only spins for a few seconds before it stops and his dizzy fatigue lessens.

There's a few side effects he's still getting over. The dizziness is one, and the fact he still can't stay standing for too long. Those are both annoying, but considering he's only been out of bed since this afternoon, he's not too surprised by it. What's worse, the one thing he *really* wishes he would've left behind in the feverish delirium of the past two days, is that every time he's alone in a quiet room, he could swear he hears someone whispering behind him.

He can never make out the words, or even the voice - sometimes it sounds familiar, though he can't place it. Sometimes it sounds like multiple voices overlayed on one another. It had been startling the first few times. In his room alone, he'd dragged himself to his feet and searched for what was making the noise, sure he'd find his laptop playing something on the lowest volume setting, or someone standing outside the door on the phone. Eventually, the whispers would go away, and Techno could never find an explanation for them.

By the third time it happened, Techno gave up on even looking.

At least they're quiet. Just loud enough to be annoying, but not so much that he can't ignore it. Especially if someone else is in the room, providing any other noise for him to focus on. It's nothing like the laughing, taunting voices in his dreams, or the ones that coax and convince him to... to *something*. They want something from him in his dreams, and every time, he wakes up with an urgency flooding him that he can't explain.

He'd been feverish, delirious, and sleep-deprived. He can blame weird dreams and unexplained panic and even a few hallucinations on that.



It's harder to keep blaming it on that when he is undeniably feeling better. When he hasn't had a fever in nearly twenty-four hours, and he's slept for almost two days straight, and everything is fine now except for a little bit of fatigue.

When he's better, but he can still hear a whisper behind him that makes the hair on his arms stand on edge.

Hands over his ears do nothing to block it out. He still looks behind him, even though he knows what he's going to see. Empty space, a doorway to the living room, and no one in sight. There are freaking floorboards and footsteps from upstairs, where Wilbur, Tubbo, and Ranboo move around. Phil's muffled voice occasionally leaks from down the hall. Everyone is accounted for and somewhere else in the house.

The only ones in the kitchen are Techno and whatever part of his mind has decided to start playing tricks on him.

He leans forward onto the table, arms over his head, as if that'll muffle the voices at all. It's vaguely grounding, if nothing else. Smooth wood beneath his face, the edge of the table digging slightly into his chest, warm air blowing against his feet from the heating vent across the kitchen. The electric hum of the refrigerator, rhythmic ticking of the clock in the living room, sporadic drumming of rain against the window's glass panes. Those are real. Those are real sounds he can hear, real things he can feel.

The whispered voices are not real. There is no one standing behind him. There is no one watching him or trying to talk to him, and the whispers are in his head, the creaking footsteps behind him are—

*Footsteps?*

Techno almost startles out of his chair. His heart rate jumps and he whips around, panic rising in his throat for half a second, and then—

Phil tilts his head slightly. "You okay, mate?"

Tension drains out of him in a handful of seconds, and he slumps back against the table. "You startled me."

"Sorry," his father says, tone genuinely apologetic. "I didn't realize you were so zoned out."

Techno rubs two fingers over his temples. "Think I'm getting a headache."

It's not entirely untrue. There is a strange fuzziness in his head and something aching at the back of it. Phil's face creases in concern, and he reaches out to press the back of his hand to Techno's forehead.

His father's hand is grounding too. Techno keeps himself from leaning into it. He's had more than enough attention the past few days. He even let Tubbo all but cuddle with him earlier. If he takes any more of this, he might implode or something.

"Doesn't feel like the fever's back," Phil says. "Have you been drinking enough water?"

Techno gestures to the half-empty glass of water sitting on the table beside him. Phil hums thoughtfully.

“Let me know if it gets any worse,” he says. “You want to take something for it?”

“Already did earlier.” Techno shrugs. “I’ll be fine.”

Footsteps thump their way down the staircase. Techno doesn’t bother turning around, but Phil smiles over his shoulder.

“Hey, Tubbo, Ranboo. How was McDonalds?”

“We didn’t make it there,” Tubbo says. He slides onto the chair beside Techno. “Got distracted and then got rained on. I’m starving.”

Phil chuckles. “All right. You good with frozen pizza, Ranboo? It’ll be faster than actually cooking something.”

As far as Techno’s aware, they haven’t had a properly cooked meal in a week. He’s not sure there’s anything besides frozen food and meals brought over by neighbors. Mostly Bad. Bad’s seemed to make it his personal goal to ensure their family is still eating well, as if he knows none of them have any desire to cook. Maybe he does. He’s known their family for a long time, after all. And Bad’s a good cook, so none of them are complaining.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Ranboo says, sounding vaguely uncomfortable. “You don’t have to worry about me eating, I’m not too hungry—”

“Can we eat in my room?” Tubbo interrupts. “Just the two of us.”

Techno glances at Tubbo. He’s not looking at anyone in particular, hair over his eyes and head tilted like he’s looking more at the table than anyone else. But Ranboo’s looking at Tubbo, and there’s a flash of gratitude in his eyes.

“Of course you can,” Phil says. “And Ranboo, even if you’re not hungry, take something to snack on anyway, all right?”

“Okay,” Ranboo says quietly.

Tubbo still won’t make eye contact. Techno’s mind spins, trying to figure out what’s going on in his head right now. Something happened while he was out with Ranboo, Techno’s sure of it. He just doesn’t know what it was, and Tubbo’s not giving out any hints.

He’d said he’d tell Techno later, though. So he’ll just have to give him some time.

So Techno’s patient. He waits while Phil starts the oven and tries to have a conversation with Ranboo. As it turns out, the kid’s nearly as bad at small talk as Techno is.

“Are you new to town, Ranboo?” Phil asks.

“Oh, no, I’m not really,” Ranboo answers. He fidgets with the hem of the sweater he’s wearing, borrowed from Wilbur. His shoulders are hunched and uncomfortable. There’s a beat of silence, like Phil is letting Ranboo have more time to answer, but he doesn’t fill it in with anything.

Phil takes it in stride. “Ah, okay. When did your family move here then, if I can ask?”

Ranboo hesitates. “Um, a few years ago. Like, three or four, I think?”

Tubbo’s head tilts. Beneath his bangs, Techno sees his eyes narrow ever so slightly.

“Gotcha. Did your parents move here for work?”

Ranboo shakes his head. “No, they, uh, they do work online, mostly. We just... needed a change of scenery.”

Phil hums. Techno can’t help interjecting. “Kind of shitty scenery. They could’ve picked a better place.”

“It’s not all bad,” Phil counters. “The mountains are very pretty, and the farmland is nice.”

Techno shrugs. He didn’t really mean the visual aspect of things, but he doesn’t say it aloud. Ranboo’s shoulders are still hunched, like he’s folding in on himself. Tubbo keeps his head down.

So nobody answers Phil. The conversation fizzles out and is left to die in peace.

As soon as the pizza is out of the oven, Tubbo hops up to put together plates for himself and Ranboo, and then drags his friend from the kitchen without another word.

Techno briefly considers following them upstairs, especially after Wilbur takes Tubbo’s vacated seat. As much as he doesn’t want to be that annoying sibling who won’t leave his brother and his friend in peace, he also does not want to be around Wilbur. They haven’t spoken, not properly, since Sunday’s argument. Techno hasn’t properly spoken to anyone since then, he realizes. It’s like he hit a giant skip button on the last two days.

“If you don’t want pizza, I can make you something else,” Phil is saying. It takes Techno a moment to realize he’s talking to him, and to shake himself out of his thoughts.

“Pizza’s fine,” Techno says. He reaches for a slice across the table, but before his hand can get there, Phil fixes him a plate and slides it over.

“Don’t push yourself,” he tells him. Techno brushes off his concern.

“I don’t even feel sick anymore. I’m fine.”

He is fine. He’s a little worn out but he’s all right, he’s got pizza and he’s rested and with others in the room, the whispers in his head are barely even audible. Things are fine.

Beside him, Wilbur is still quiet.

It's later that evening that Tubbo reappears, DVD case in hand and Ranboo in tow. Techno's on the couch, not quite ready to move to his room for the night and knowing he might not have the energy for multiple trips up and down the stairs. Wilbur and Phil are still in the kitchen.

"We're going to watch a movie," Tubbo states.

"Okay. Do you want me to leave?" Techno goes to close his laptop, but Tubbo just plops down on the couch beside him.

"Nope. Stay and watch with us."

So Techno does.

Halfway through, Tubbo's head drifts back against the couch, and then his whole body shifts to the side, resting against Techno's shoulder. Techno doesn't move, but he glances down at his sleeping brother and then across at Ranboo. Ranboo's already looking back in his direction, the faintest of amusement in his eyes.

"You wore him out today, huh?" Techno whispers.

Ranboo's eyes crinkle at the corners, a little hint of a smile. "Apparently so. He's had a long day."

Techno hums at that. He guesses he could ask Ranboo what had happened, find out whatever it is that Tubbo isn't sharing with him, but he's not sure. Tubbo had said he'd tell Techno. He's not exactly trying to hide it from him. He's pretty sure.

He can be patient longer.

When the movie runs its credits, Ranboo carefully gets to his feet, taking care not to wake Tubbo.

"I should head home before it gets too late," Ranboo says quietly. "It was nice to meet you, Techno."

Techno nods. "Ask Phil or Wilbur to drive you home, Ranboo. It's dark and late and I'm pretty sure it's still raining."

"Oh, no, I'm fine. I don't want to inconvenience anyone," Ranboo says. Techno ignores that and gingerly reaches one arm for his phone.

"Nah," he says, typing with one hand. "You're not walking alone in the dark."

*(9:25) techno: can u give ranboo ride home*

Rather than texting a response, a few seconds later, Wilbur peeks out from the kitchen. He raises one hand, Phil's car keys hanging from his fingers.

As Wilbur stands in the doorway, Techno notices something with an odd feeling in his chest. His twin's eyes and nose are red, and Techno knows him far too well to not immediately recognize it. His heart twists.

"I'll take you home, Ranboo," Wilbur says, and he has a smile that only looks sad to Techno. He lowers his voice once he sees Tubbo asleep on the couch. "It's not a problem, don't try to argue with me."

"Okay," Ranboo relents. "Thank you, Wilbur."

From his spot in the living room, Techno can hear the quiet voices of Phil bidding goodbye to Ranboo too.

"You're welcome back any time," he hears Phil say. "*Any* time. All right?"

Ranboo's reply is too quiet to make out, but he's sure it's in agreement.

Then the front door opens and closes a moment later, and things are quiet. Phil steps in a minute after, fixing a fond smile in Techno and Tubbo's direction.

"I'm going to bed," he whispers as he crosses the room, a gentle hand resting on Techno's shoulder and settling a blanket over Tubbo.

"This early?" Techno cracks dryly. "Old man."

Phil just shakes his head, still smiling, but there's something sad about his expression too. Maybe it's the dark, sleepless lines under his eyes, or the way his smile doesn't quite extend past his mouth.

Phil squeezes his shoulder. "Love you."

It's not like Techno's never heard Phil say that before. It's not even *unusual*, necessarily. Phil is affectionate with his words and his actions.

Techno just hasn't heard it in a week. And last week feels like a lifetime ago.

"Love you too," Techno manages to mumble out, even though his father has already started to walk away by the time he gets his tongue in working order. He doesn't know if it was loud enough to hear. Doesn't know if it was louder than a whisper; louder than the things already in his head.

His head is too full. His own voice echoes in it until he barely recognizes the sound. It's too quiet and too loud all at once, an echoing, deafening, empty noise. He squeezes his eyes shut, and it does nothing to help. There's an odd feeling twisting in his stomach; not the nausea he's had for a week, but something stranger and unfamiliar.

In his head, images play. Tubbo is caught in the rain and something is *wrong*. Something is so wrong he texts Wilbur, of all people, for help. He texts Wilbur and not Techno.

Wilbur and Phil sit in the kitchen together, and Wilbur is in tears. Wilbur's eyes are red and his nose is red and Techno's seen him that way so many times before, but it's never made him feel so much like a stranger as it does now. Wilbur doesn't go to Techno to cry. He hasn't in years.

Techno sits on the couch alone.

Phil is upstairs. Wilbur is not home. Tubbo is asleep on his shoulder, quiet breath and occasional twitches.

Someone stands behind Techno and whispers.

He's not sick anymore. He's not sick and the whispers still won't go away.

Techno's laptop is still beside him, so he eases it open in his lap, taking care not to jostle Tubbo at all. He opens Google, and then his fingers hesitate over the keyboard. It takes a long, long moment for him to get the words down.

*"Symptoms of psychosis"* is the first thing he puts in. A long paragraph comes up, and his eyes skim through it without really registering. He changes the search, *"hallucinations after being sick,"* and tries that.

He reads page after page while someone whispers behind him and that uncomfortable feeling turns over on itself in his stomach. On one hand, some of the information he learns is comforting. It's probably *not* a sign of a mental illness only just now showing the first symptoms, because the only thing he can check off that list are the hallucinations. Which, granted, is a pretty big check mark, but it's still only one thing.

The other hand is that he has no idea why it's happening. He doesn't have a fever anymore, so he can't attribute it to that. He's not sleep-deprived anymore. It's not that.

He clicks onto another page. As he does, Tubbo shifts slightly on his shoulder, and Techno freezes.

"Why're you researching hallucinations?" Tubbo asks sleepily.

"Uh," Techno says. He closes the tab. "School project."

Tubbo sits up and rubs his eyes, and then he looks around the room like he's seeing it for the first time. "Where's Ranboo?"

"Wilbur drove him home," Techno says. "It got late."

"Oh," Tubbo says, and he sounds incredibly sad. "I didn't get to say goodbye."

"It's okay, Tubbo. He just didn't want to wake you up."

"But I didn't say goodbye," Tubbo says, and now Techno's stomach twists, because he sounds genuinely upset. "He just left..."

“He’s okay,” Techno says, as gentle as he can make his voice. “Wilbur’s driving him home. He’ll get there safely.”

Tubbo sniffs. He stares down at his hands, pulls his hoodie sleeves down to hide even the tips of his fingers. Techno can’t tell if he’s still mostly asleep, or if this is something that really bothers Tubbo now.

“Do you want to go up to bed?” Techno asks. Tubbo shakes his head. “Okay. Do you want to eat dessert with me in the kitchen?”

Tubbo nods at that one.

There’s ice cream in the freezer. Techno dishes out two bowls of it and hands one to Tubbo, who’s climbed up on the counter to sit there. Techno sits in a chair.

Rain still drums against the windows. Tubbo’s spoon clinks against his bowl as he eats his ice cream slowly and in silence.

The oven clock blinks to 10:00.

One week, Techno thinks. A bitter recognition of the anniversary that’s on them.

Techno and Tubbo eat ice cream in the kitchen. One week ago right now, Tommy walks out the door behind them, and no one stops him.

“I’m worried about Ranboo,” Tubbo blurts out suddenly. Techno looks up.

“Why?”

Tubbo stares down into his bowl, spoon in unmoving hand. “He says stuff that doesn’t line up. Like... like he told me he’s lived here awhile, and he made it sound like he meant a long time, but then he told Phil he’s only lived here a few years. And I guess that doesn’t immediately mean he was lying to me, but it just—I don’t know, it feels like he’s leaving something out.”

Techno takes a bite of ice cream. There was something unusual about Ranboo, but Techno had just attributed to social awkwardness and the slight mystery of that mask he wore.

“And he definitely lied about other things,” Tubbo continues. “He kept making this like, joke or something about how he doesn’t go outside, but literally every time I ask if we can do something, he’s there to do it. I don’t know his last name, I don’t know his parents names, I don’t even know what they do for a job. He avoids answering anything.”

“He could just be secretive,” Techno suggests, and Tubbo makes a frustrated noise.

“He *could* be,” Tubbo says. “But then there’s the mask. He took it off today, while we were out, and—and I probably shouldn’t tell you, because he wears it for a reason, he doesn’t want people to see, but I... I’m *worried*, Techno. I’m worried someone hurt him on purpose.”

That freezes Techno's hand halfway from his bowl to his mouth. Tubbo looks up too now, and there's a sad, concerned look on his face.

"How worried?" Techno asks carefully. "Do we need to tell Phil?"

"I don't know what we'd tell him," Tubbo says. "Like, I asked him if it—if he got the scar from his parents, and he said no, and I don't think he was lying that time. He's a bad liar. I'm pretty sure I would've been able to tell."

Techno nods slowly. This is... not the conversation he was expecting to have with Tubbo tonight. "Okay. So... Do you want me to try to talk to him about it? Or..."

Tubbo's already shaking his head. "I think that'll scare him off. I told him I could tell he was lying about something, and he immediately clammed up and wouldn't say anything else."

"Maybe we just need to get to know him better, then," Techno says. "Keep inviting him over. Be his friend. Make sure he knows he can trust us if he's in some sort of danger."

"I guess." Tubbo sets down his bowl and instead rubs his face with his hands. "I want to know what's wrong *now*. I want to make sure he's okay. The idea that... that he might be going back to something dangerous..."

"I know," Techno says. It aches in his chest. Part of him wants to wrap Tubbo up in a hug right now. For a moment, Tubbo sitting up on the counter and curled onto himself looks so small, and Techno can see a younger, smaller Tubbo from years ago in his place. The Tubbo who had just moved in with them, barely fourteen, scared of any noise, and so jumpy it made Techno's heart ache for him.

Techno doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about Tubbo's life before he lived with them, partly because Tubbo himself doesn't like to have it so much as mentioned, and partly because it makes Techno want to punch something. But there are little moments where it peeks out, and one of those moments is right here, where Tubbo knows better than anyone what kind of dangers someone could have to go home to.

"We'll keep him safe," Techno tells Tubbo. "If there is something going on. Wilbur will know where he lives now, if we ever need to pick him up. And he knows where we live if he needs to come here."

Tubbo nods. "Yeah. Okay."

When Wilbur gets home, dripping rainwater in the front hall, Techno is the only one in the kitchen. Wilbur leaves his coat and boots by the door and then steps in, and his gaze fixes on Techno for a long moment.

"Hey there," Techno says, just to break the silence.

"What's Ranboo's deal?" Wilbur asks, in lieu of any greeting.



Well. Guess Ranboo's the buzzword of the evening.

"What do you mean?" Techno asks.

Wilbur sits down on the chair across the kitchen table from Techno. "I mean, I don't know him at all. But he's... odd. What's up with him?"

"I have no idea," Techno says. "I just met him today too."

"Oh," Wilbur says. He stops, and then starts again. "I thought maybe he was one of Tubbo's older friends and I just didn't know him."

"Nope." Techno shakes his head. "They've just bonded pretty quickly, I think. But, uh. Why do you ask?"

Techno's not sure he should share everything Tubbo had told him with Wilbur, but if there's something else Wilbur's noticed, Techno wants to know. He's worried about the kid too now.

"When I dropped him off at his house," Wilbur says, "I think he snuck in the back. Like, went all the way around to the back door and I didn't see any of the lights go on."

Huh.

Techno blinks. "That's... odd."

"Yeah," Wilbur agrees. "It was very odd. Like... I don't even know what kind of conclusion to draw from that, it just seemed strange."

"It is strange," Techno echoes. It's *really* strange. He's trying to fit this with the information Tubbo gave him, and he feels like he's missing something. There's a piece that's not there, and he doesn't know what it is. He doesn't think it's as simple as Tubbo's fears, whether or not that's any sort of comfort.

Or maybe he's overthinking. Is that possible? Is this not as weird as it seems?

Part of Techno wonders if they're all just a little extra worried. If Tubbo's new-found fear of missed goodbyes has a hand in this; if the way Techno's mind keeps spinning things to wonder what he's doing wrong is making him more nervous that he should be; if they're all noticing little things more than they would've before, because they all missed something big and now they're here, in a house that still feels too empty as the clock ticks further and further past ten o'clock.

It's been a week.

It feels simultaneously like this week has gone by in a blink, and at the same time, as if he's been living in it forever. He thinks he could close his eyes and he'd be back in this kitchen working on that stupid essay, and he could reach out to grab Tommy on his way out the door. He could grab him and hold him and never let go.

But time is messy for Techno now. At the same moment that Tommy feels close enough to grab, he feels an eternity away. Techno has already lived a lifetime without him. He can't remember what shoes Tommy was wearing when he left.

He wonders how long it will be before he forgets more. Until this eternity without his youngest brother drains every memory from his mind and leaves in its place only uneasy whispers.

## Chapter End Notes

i always think of a bunch of things to tell you guys while i'm working on a chapter, and then as soon as i sit down to publish it, i become no thoughts head empty. rip.  
hope you all have a lovely day! thank you as always for reading, kudos, bookmarks, those of you sharing this fic with friends, and of course, my beloved commenters <3 you are all the coolest people ever!

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Summary

But he's standing in the middle of the sanctuary, and it's empty and abandoned, the rot that's always lived in it finally showing itself for the world to see. When he snaps himself out of his thoughts to the sound of creaking footsteps behind, he turns around, and there's Wilbur, brown coat over maroon sweater and hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Hey," Wilbur says. "You okay?"

Quackity doesn't bother with a lie for an answer. "I'm gonna burn this fucking place to the ground."

Wilbur grins.

## Chapter Notes

another short chapter today as planned! we'll probably skip this weeks wednesday update because i'm planning the next one to be much longer and i don't want to rush it. we're starting to get into the real bulk of the story now! (speaking of which. if you see me adding chapters to the total length of this fic, no you didn't)

i added the implied/reference child abuse tag awhile ago and religious trauma as a tag today. this chapter is why they exist. take care of yourselves!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sunlight filters in through the window, grey and somber. It's a day that feels worn out, as if all the life has already been drained out of it before it's hardly past noon. He's still lying on the couch with no real urgency to get up, nowhere to be today and nothing that grabs his attention. It's not like there's much to do on a cold Thursday afternoon in this shitty town.

He'd spent the week alternating between filling out applications and avoiding filling out applications. Sapnap's being patient with him - a bit *too* patient, enough to leave a little bitter taste of pity behind - so he hasn't been pushing him to get anything done. But Quackity doesn't want to be a burden, as much as he wants to just stay on this couch for the rest of the day without moving.

The only thing worse than being back in this town is being back in this town with nothing to do.

So he's trying to get his feet back under him.

Something buzzes behind his head. Quackity startles, then rolls over and stares in momentary confusion at the empty cushion. The buzzing happens again.

Realization hits him, and he digs his hand behind the cushion, retrieving the source of the noise. Sapnap got him a phone. He keeps forgetting he has it. A text lights up the screen.

*(12:21) karlos: hey handsome ;]*

*(12:22) karlos: what are you doing this weekend?*

Quackity suppresses a fond eye roll before he texts back.

*(12:23) quackity: does your bf know you're flirting with other men?*

*(12:23) karlos: not all other men. you're special ;]*

*(12:24) quackity: wow ;)*

*(12:25) quackity: no plans this weekend except waiting around for calls. Why?*

*(12:26) karlos: hang out with me!! sunday i am off work let's do somethingg*

*(12:26) quackity: works for me*

*(12:27) karlos: yes perfect i'll pick you up :] gotta go back to work now love youuuuu*

*(12:28) quackity: love you too <3*

Quackity's grinning at his phone as he sets it down. It takes a moment to fully recognize this for what it is - the giddy grin, the fluttery feeling in his chest, along with a sudden surge of motivation to actually get up off this couch.

It's a nice feeling. It's a familiar feeling too, one that had gotten him through most of high school and the hell that encompassed it. And it's a feeling he was supposed to leave behind along with the rest of this town.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Fucking Karl and his dumb cute giggle and fluffy hair and clingy hugs, and the way he flirts as a joke but it gets stuck inside of Quackity's head anyway and makes him wish it wasn't a joke. Fucking Karl, who's perfect in almost every way and makes Sapnap happier than anyone else, because of course he does, he's *Karl* and anyone who's not at least a little in love with him has to be completely stupid.

Quackity remembers the day Sapnap and Karl had told him, hand in hand, that they were dating now. It hadn't come as a surprise; you only needed to take one look at them to be able to tell that Sapnap and Karl were made for each other. Karl's long arms fit perfectly around Sapnap's shoulders, leaning over him everywhere they went. Karl walks like he's floating, and Quackity knows his head tends to float too, but Sapnap keeps him here on the ground. Sapnap's as quick to anger as he is to forgiveness, and Karl is steady and unrelenting in his love.

Sapnap and Karl were best friends when Quackity moved here. He fit into their duo and it felt right, like Quackity was made a little to fit between them too. He entertained that idea growing up, that maybe Karl's arms could fit as perfectly over Quackity's shoulders as they do Sapnap's, and maybe Quackity too could hold onto Karl and keep him from drifting away.

But then they were sixteen, and Sapnap and Karl were holding hands and blushing nervously as if they hadn't known each other forever and ever, and it was in that moment that Quackity realized Karl and Sapnap were the soulmates and he was only an add-on.

It's not jealousy, exactly. Or, maybe a little, but not the angry kind. Not the kind that thinks he *deserves* that. Just that he wishes he could have it.

Because Sapnap and Karl are perfect. And they both deserve that.

And Quackity will never, ever do anything to jeopardize it.

Earlier this week, Karl had sat down beside him with an apology.

"I don't really remember most of Saturday," he'd said, and he sounded so genuinely apologetic it had made Quackity's stomach twist. "But Sapnap told me what happened, and that you're the one who brought me home. So I just wanted to say thank you and sorry."

Quackity brushed it off, of course. Told Karl not to worry about it, that Quackity's more worried about Karl being okay.

"I know you have Sapnap and everything, but if anything like that ever happens again, you can call me too," he told him. A belated offer at being there, at helping Karl even a fraction as much as he's helped Quackity.

Karl gave him a smile for it, and that's more than enough thanks. The smile still sits warm in his chest and heavy in his mind.

He sits outside that night, just beside the doorstep. Cold seeps into him from the cement he's sitting on, and it's far from comfortable, but the air is cold and clear as a gentle breeze plays with his hair. The clouds are still heavy, threatening the days ahead with yet more rain and blocking the stars from sight, but every now and then he catches a glimpse of a half moon behind dark blue wisps of cloud.

The door creaks behind him. Open, shut. Footsteps stop beside him, and then ease down to sit at his side.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Quackity says. "Just wanted some air."

Sapnap accepts the answer with silence. A moment passes, and then another. There's no urgency to fill the silence, and there's nothing too loud in Quackity's head. It's just quiet. It's nice.

Sapnap shivers a little. He moves closer to Quackity, their shoulders brushing. It's just for warmth, Quackity tells himself, as he leans back against his friend too.

“I want ice cream,” Sapnap says, apropos of nothing.

“It’s like, negative a hundred degrees out,” Quackity says. “You’re literally shivering.”

“I want ice cream,” Sapnap repeats, insistent. “We’re out. Let’s get some from the store.”

Quackity turns to raise an eyebrow at him, but Sapnap just meets his gaze with pleading eyes. And, well. Who is Quackity to argue with that?

They drive to Dollar General with music blaring. Quackity almost feels bad for how loud they’re being at nine o’clock at night, but it’s a Friday, so who gives a shit. Sapnap’s singing along with the radio, and Quackity keeps finding himself stealing glances in his direction.

Yellow streetlight outlines the edges of his face and hair, tied back into a loose ponytail. He drives with one hand, the other waving in time with the music he’s singing, and Quackity feels that fluttering in his chest.

This feels a little like he’s been teleported back to another time. Like they’re teenagers, sneaking out and driving off somewhere people won’t think to look for them. Sapnap was usually the one to instigate stuff like that, and Quackity never turned it down. They dragged Karl along too, and then the twins and Dream and George along behind them.

Sapnap was always the most rebellious of them growing up, which was funny given the absolute sweetheart his dad is. Quackity remembers a bit of jealousy he’d harbored towards him for that. Sapnap would complain about Bad’s overbearing concern or strict rules, and it took everything in Quackity not to snap.

But Sapnap didn’t know, he’d remind himself. He didn’t know what he had to complain about. And he’d stopped, never mentioned it ever again after... after everything. Even still, part of Quackity finds relief in knowing that Sapnap’s greatest quarrel with his father was only over broken curfews.

They’re not sneaking out now. There’s no thrum of anxiety and thrill of freedom in Quackity’s chest now. There’s something in it, sure, but it’s not the same as it once was. They’re just driving to get ice cream and then going back to Sapnap’s apartment to eat it.

Things are the same and they are different, and Quackity feels like he’s stuck holding on to something he doesn’t really want. The past still has its fingers dug into him, but things have changed too much to really understand it. He can’t stay here and he can’t move on, and there’s an empty ache in his chest and a fluttering in the emptiness.

He ignores the ache tonight. He sits on Sapnap’s apartment floor and eats ice cream with him. Scratchy carpet digs into his bare legs. The container of ice cream chills his hands. He is here, he is here, he can feel these things.

When he sleeps that night, he's seventeen years old and nothing has changed. He wakes up with tears still drying on his face.

At the bottom of the list of contacts in Quackity's phone, there's a number that he keeps thinking about.

There are a few numbers Sapnap had already saved onto his phone - Sapnap himself, Karl, Bad. Some local numbers. The basics, so Quackity can easily get ahold of anyone he needs to.

And then at the bottom, there's Wilbur.

He'd toyed around with texting him once or twice this week. Just to see if it was actually his number, say hello. But there's something holding him back from it.

It's been a long, long time since he and Wilbur were on friendly terms. It isn't that they'd fallen out; there was never any moment they decided to stop talking, or ended a friendship out of anger. It's just that sometimes, there are things you can't look each other in the eye the same way after.

But Quackity wakes up this morning with an itching in his bones and an emptiness in his chest and the idea of being alone today aches and aches in him.

He needs to know where he is. He needs to keep himself in his own body and most importantly, out of the woods.

So Quackity gives in.

*(2:57) quackity: hey. it's q*

*(2:58) quackity: do you want to break something*

The response comes in less than a minute later.

*(2:58) wilbur: hey :)*

*(2:58) wilbur: always*

*(2:59) quackity: the church still has windows. someone should fix that*

*(3:00) wilbur: on my way*

It's been a long time since Quackity has stood inside this church. It's dusty and abandoned now, pulpit empty and unused, bibles and hymnals left to rot in the back of pews. He picks one up idly and flips it to a random page.

He hates that he still remembers these songs. That if someone told him a lyric, he could hum it, could flip to the right page, might even be able to tinker out some notes on the horribly out of key piano up onstage. Tubbo was always better at the piano than him, constantly paraded

up to show off both during service and again after. Quackity was shown off too, but not in the same way.

He remembers sitting on these pews, all dressed up and straightened posture and the perfect little church kid. He remembers a much younger Tubbo, sat beside him in his neat little suit and combed hair, and how all the church ladies would fawn over him, over them both, how sweet and well-behaved they both were.

He nearly grew up here, ten years old and learning to call the inside of a church home. Learning that the other people in the church are family now, same as this new father of his, this new little brother with his suit and combed hair and quiet voice. Tubbo learned how to sit still in a pew and look sweet for everyone else even earlier than Quackity did.

It was such a show. Such a *fucking* show. To sit there and look pretty and pretend everything was fine, as if they're the perfect children with perfect parents. Listen to everyone rattle off praise as if any of it was even a word of truth.

*"What good brothers they are! They're so polite and well-mannered! Your parents have done a wonderful job raising you, haven't they?"*

It's that last one that gets stuck in his head and plays on repeat. Over and over and over, bouncing around inside his skull. *Your parents have done a wonderful job, haven't they? Haven't they? Agree with them, Alex, haven't we done a wonderful job?*

Quackity hurls the hymnal in his hand against the wall. It hits the wooden cross hung there with a loud *thunk*, and it makes the cross shake. Quackity could tear it down. Drag the whole fucking thing off the wall and burn it to ash.

He hates this place. He hates this place so much it's like something growing inside of him, but something that grows backwards, that doesn't fill the empty space but eats and eats at him, gnaws at that ache in his chest and empties him even further. It's sick in his stomach and loud in his head and heavy in his hands.

This is the place he earned bruised wrists from speaking out of turn, dragged to a coat closet for a lecture. This is the place he memorized Bible verses along with strategies to keep himself and his brother safe. This is the place he heard stories of a God who was supposed to love him, and lectures about the same God who hated him for secrets Quackity wouldn't ever say aloud, and still let him go home after service to a house that was never anything but hell.

The whole congregation was surprised when the incident happened, as if no one could believe such evil could exist in this place. As if it hadn't been living under their noses for years. Part of Quackity hates all of them too. He's angry, he's hurt, he was a *child*, Tubbo was a *fucking child* and they all let this happen. No one ever even noticed. Sometimes he thinks even after everything, if he told someone what had happened, what it had been like, he would still hear *"but your parents did such a good job raising you!"*

There's a part of him that still lives here in this church. A piece that's still a teenager in love with his best friend and hating himself for it; something still guilty as much as angry for the



things he's seen and the things he's felt. Even years later, he lives still within a moment of fear and hell.

But he's standing in the middle of the sanctuary, and it's empty and abandoned, the rot that's always lived in it finally showing itself for the world to see. Now he snaps himself out of his thoughts to the sound of creaking footsteps behind. He turns around, and there's Wilbur, brown coat over maroon sweater and hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Hey," Wilbur says. "You okay?"

Quackity doesn't bother with a lie for an answer. "I'm gonna burn this fucking place to the ground."

Wilbur grins.

He actually brought matches.

Quackity doesn't know *why* he has them, but he doesn't ask. He has the feeling it might raise more questions than it answers. And the thing is, it's *really* tempting, enough for him to actually take the box when Wilbur holds it out, roll it between his fingers. They're still stood in the sanctuary. He could strike a match and hold it to that cross on the wall and let the whole thing burn.

"Let's not get arrested for arson," Quackity says finally, handing the matches back to Wilbur. At least not while Sapnap's sticking his neck out for him.

"We could make it look like an accident," Wilbur says, but he pockets the box anyway. "Set it from the basement. There's still old electrical equipment and wiring down there, isn't there? It's been storming. Maybe something shorted out. They wouldn't know."

"I don't think that's how it works." This place hasn't had electricity connected to it in at least a year by now.

"One way to find out." Wilbur makes a beeline for the stairs that lead down to the church's basement. Quackity hesitates for only a moment before following him down.

In one hand, Wilbur carries his phone, leading the way with the flashlight on. Quackity's feet carry him down the stairs as easily with the light as without, walking with a familiarity that still sits heavy in his stomach. He pulls his own phone from his pocket, poking at the screen until he figures out how to turn the flashlight on.

The church basement looks... well, abandoned, he guesses. But in an eerie way. Nobody cleaned up from the last time someone used it, he thinks, with tables and chairs still set up and left scattered around the open room. A few have tipped over, and the metal is rusting on the folding chairs.

In addition to the light from both of their phones, a bit of dim sunlight filters through a few ground-level windows. One of the windows is opened, and a cold draft filters through the

room from it.

“Someone’s been down here,” Wilbur says, pointing across the basement. In one corner, a few tables have been pushed aside to make a sort of sheltered clearing, and a ragged, threadbare blanket is bundled up against the wall.

Quackity moves over for a closer look. Footprints stand out in the thick layer of dust covering the floor. Whoever it was has been down here recently. “Kids messing around, maybe?”

“That or someone living here.” Wilbur points at a backpack barely visible from under one table, hidden away.

“Shitty place to live.” Quackity looks around the basement again for any sign of someone else down here, but it’s entirely deserted. Probably for the better they don’t stick around here for too long, though. He’s not sure he can handle being down here a lot longer anyway.

There are memories everywhere in this town, but they congregate especially heavy here. He hasn’t been down here in years. Not since the funeral, he thinks. When he and Tubbo sat at these tables and chairs, dressed up to put on one last show, and then Tubbo went home with Phil and Tommy, and Quackity ran as far as his legs would take him, and then farther still.

Back then, Phil had extended the offer to Quackity too. It was decided that Tubbo would stay with them almost before everything had even happened, with Quackity tacked on as an afterthought. They were brothers, after all. Wouldn’t they want to stay together?

When everything happened and he and Tubbo stood down here in this church basement, Quackity had had to do the math quickly. It took only a minute. The math was that he and Tubbo were now the charity case of the town. No matter how much you believed of their story, they were the ones to look at and whisper, “*Did you hear about those poor kids?*”

Phil is a good man, though. He didn’t look at them like a charity case. He’d adopted three sons already, and the youngest of them had held Tubbo’s hand all through the funeral. Tubbo didn’t look at Quackity even once.

He’d turned down Phil’s offer the moment he heard it. Their family was Tubbo’s, not his. When he found out they’d properly adopted Tubbo a year later, it wasn’t a surprise. They were Tubbo’s chance to move on.

He couldn’t look Tubbo in the eye. It was like something had broken inside of Quackity, and it hasn’t been fixed since. He can’t look at Tubbo, he can barely look at *Wilbur*, and being back in this place again tears into his chest with gaping claws.

It’s cold in this basement. It cuts into him right through Sappnap’s hoodie he still hasn’t given back.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” Quackity blurts out abruptly. Wilbur is all the way across the room now, fiddling with a locked door that Quackity knows leads to the utility closet. He stops and looks back, flashlight pointed in his direction.

“Okay,” Wilbur says. It’s too dark to see his eyes, glasses reflecting light and obscuring his expression, but his tone is easy. Measured. “Do you want me to drive you home?”

He means Sapnap’s apartment, Quackity thinks. But something about hearing the word *home* right now, while his mind is caught somewhere halfway between the present and a past he can’t let go of, sends his chest into a panic.

“No,” he says. “I just want to leave *here*.”

Wilbur nods once, twice. “Let’s get pizza.”

“Do you ever feel like—” Quackity asks suddenly, “—like you’re stuck?”

They’re sitting in a booth now, Wilbur across from him. Conversation buzzes around his ears and electric light glares down from above.

“How do you mean?”

“With everything,” he says. “You can’t let go and you can’t hold on to anything either, so you keep trying to move but you end up circling back to the same thing over and over.”

Wilbur’s quiet for a moment. “Yeah. Like if you stop moving for a second you’ll end up right back where you left.”

“Yeah,” Quackity echoes. There’s pizza in front of them. This pizza shop has been here for years, and it tastes exactly like it had when they were teenagers. The booths are the same. The lights are the same. The goddamn food is the same, this town is the same, nothing has changed.

Quackity and Wilbur are both here in this town again. They’ve gotten older. They haven’t changed.

“Do you think things ever change?” Quackity asks.

“Some things,” Wilbur says, but he sounds reluctant. He uses the straw in his drink as a stirrer, absently clinking the ice against the glass. “I think *circumstances* change. Situations. I think physically, this town is different now than it was before we left.”

Wilbur’s words feel simultaneously like a breath of relief and like a rock weighted heavy in his stomach. He gets it. Quackity’s jumbled thoughts are smoothed into something that makes sense when Wilbur speaks it aloud.

“I think deep down, though, nothing here has really changed.”

“I think this place is cursed,” Quackity says, and Wilbur shrugs. He doesn’t disagree.

“Time doesn’t change things here,” Wilbur says. “Not really. It keeps circling back to the same place over and over, even as people grow up and get older, buildings get torn down and

rebuilt, the landscape changes and time wears on. It stays the same anyway.”

Quackity’s pizza is going cold on his plate. He can’t get himself to pick it up.

“A hundred years ago,” Wilbur says, and his voice sounds like he’s telling a story, enthralling and encompassing Quackity’s attention, “two people sat here in the same place we are right now, in whatever building was here before this pizza shop was built on its ruins. Maybe they came here from the mines, tired and looking for something they couldn’t put a finger on either. And they ate together, they spoke, and they had a conversation the same as the one we’re having right now, wondering if things are ever going to change. If they’re ever going to get better.”

His throat is dry.

“Things don’t get better.” The words fall from his mouth, so matter-of-fact, so casually, and Quackity can’t find it in himself to disagree. He’s right. Things don’t get better here. “The coal mines close and people lose their jobs, but they don’t leave. They stay here and get poorer and things never get better for them, or for their children, or for the children of their children, who build a pizza shop and sit in it and talk about the same things their ancestors did. Their kids can try to leave, something their parents never did, but it doesn’t matter if they do, because something drags you back no matter how *hard you try*.”

Wilbur’s voice turns softly passionate, barely controlled emotion just under its surface. Wilbur has always been prone to the philosophical, but this feels personal. Not just for Quackity, though it sits in his chest with a particular sting as if it was; this is personal for Wilbur, too.

He doesn’t think he can speak. Doesn’t want to break the heavy silence Wilbur has built up. But Wilbur’s gone quiet too, straw held between two fingers, staring down at the drink he hasn’t touched.

“Eventually, time always circles back to the same thing.” Wilbur says it quietly, slowly. “Even change lends itself to the cycle. History repeats itself, forever and ever.”

## Chapter End Notes

as always let me know your thoughts and theories in the comments!! i love hearing them so much :3

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur starts to look nervous. “We haven’t really hung out since I got back and all, so I just thought... we could do something? Brotherly bonding or something.”

Tubbo has work to do today. There’s a list of names in his backpack and it’ll rain tomorrow or the day after, so he really should work on it today.

But Wilbur said brotherly, and now he’s looking at Tubbo with a sort of nervous hope in his eyes. There’s almost certainly an underlying motive here; there always seems to be with Wilbur. But he’s asking, and Tubbo doesn’t think he’s strong enough to say no.

## Chapter Notes

i am the master of my own fate and also my own update schedule if i say we have a surprise friday night update THEN WE GET A SURPRISE FRIDAY NIGHT UPDATE.  
i can do whatever i want this is my fic

hope you guys enjoy the chapter! :3c

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo hops down the stairs two at a time, pulling his backpack over one shoulder. The weather outside is gloomy, but not rainy. It looks like it’ll hold off another day or two, which is good for Tubbo. He and Ranboo have work to do, and he’s not interested in getting caught out in the rain again today.

“Hey,” Wilbur says as Tubbo steps into the kitchen. He’s leaning against the counter, phone in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other. “Question.”

“Answer,” Tubbo says in reply.

“You wanna see a film today?”

Tubbo’s mind goes blank. He stands in the middle of the kitchen, feet stuck to the floor, and his head whirs. “Huh?”

“I thought we could go see something,” Wilbur says. “The theatre in town has a 2 o’clock showing of some new sci-fi action film. Looks like a lot of explosions and dumb plot. Your kinda shit.”

Tubbo just stares. “Today?”

Wilbur starts to look nervous. “Yeah. We haven’t really hung out since I got back and all, so I just thought... we could do something? Brotherly bonding or something.”

Brotherly. That word crinkles under his skin, but at the same time, it lodges in his throat. He wishes he could easily say no and not regret it, but something in him jumps in excitement when Wilbur acknowledges it. That they’re brothers. That they’re family.

“I told Ranboo we’d hang out today,” Tubbo says slowly.

“He could come with,” Wilbur offers, hesitant but hopeful.

Tubbo has work to do today. There’s a list of names in his backpack and it’ll rain tomorrow or the day after, so he really should work on it today.

But Wilbur said *brotherly*, and now he’s looking at Tubbo with a sort of nervous hope in his eyes. There’s almost certainly an underlying motive here; there always seems to be with Wilbur. But he’s asking, and Tubbo doesn’t think he’s strong enough to say no.

Plus, has Ranboo ever been in a movie theatre before?

Tubbo wavers for only a moment longer. “All right. I’m supposed to meet him in half an hour so we gotta leave soon if we’re bringing him. *And* you’re paying for popcorn.”

Wilbur’s face breaks into a smile, genuine and familiar. It sits heavy in Tubbo’s chest and sends a hum of excitement through him too. The idea of Wilbur being his brother... He pushes it aside. He’ll deal with it later.

When he was little, Tubbo was jealous of Tommy.

He can acknowledge it now, looking back. He’d visit his family, sit at his kitchen table, and Phil would smile so genuinely and let them shout and swear and never once get upset about it. The closest they ever got to being in trouble was the time he and Tommy caught a squirrel with a broken leg and hid it in Tommy’s room, and then the thing got loose and chewed up the living room couch. When Phil found out, Tubbo had felt like he’d be sick, terrified of how angry his friend’s father would be. Instead, Phil gave them a talking to about bringing wild animals into the house, and he made them clean up the whole house from the mess the thing had made, and then after that, he drove the two of them two hours away to an animal rescue center where they could leave the squirrel to heal.

It turned out to be one of the nicest days of Tubbo’s life. And it sat like a pool of longing, aching jealousy inside of him. Days like that weren’t out of the ordinary for Tommy, he learned. They were only this special for Tubbo.

It was the case for the rest of Tommy’s family, too. Tommy would bother Techno into paying attention to them, standing outside his door and yelling insults and pleading bargains until he came out and agreed to take them wherever they wanted to go, and Tubbo quietly wished he

had the option to do that. He didn't ever bother Quackity that way; not because he was afraid of him or anything, but because they both knew to keep quiet and keep to themselves.

Quackity took Tubbo to the library to do his homework and to the ice cream shop across town over the summer. Quackity lied to cover for Tubbo to spend more time with Tommy. Quackity taught Tubbo how to wedge his door shut in a way that was almost as good as being locked, showed him the best places to hide things where their parents wouldn't think to look, and led by example in regards to being quiet and staying out of the way.

He doesn't want to sound ungrateful about that. It was what he needed, at the time. But he couldn't help wishing he had an older brother he could shout at and play with the way Tommy did.

And there was the reverse - Quackity never bothered him the way Wilbur would pester Tommy, inviting himself to sleepovers Tubbo and Tommy would have and filling up the conversation until Tommy told him to fuck off and stop trying to steal all his friends. Wilbur and Tommy would roughhouse enough to make Tubbo worried sometimes, with Wilbur pinning Tommy to the ground and tickling him until Tommy kicked him in the face. Wilbur ended up with a bloody nose once, and Tommy had had no remorse, just shouting that it's what he got for being a "piece of shit dickhead brother."

"I'll cry," Wilbur had said, blood running down his chin, parroting his half of their inside joke Tubbo never fully understood.

"Then sob," Tommy told him.

And then by the end of the hour, they'd be fine again. They'd sit beside each other on the couch during a movie night as if nothing had happened. Even serious arguments, after Tubbo learned to tell the difference between them and the admittedly aggressive play-fights, went the same way. They never stayed upset with each other for long.

And it made Tubbo so incredibly jealous.

He wanted this to be *his* family. He wanted Techno and Wilbur to be his brothers too - Tommy already was, had declared himself to be within a year of knowing Tubbo - and he wanted Phil to be his dad and he wanted to have a family he *liked* being around. Who liked having him around too.

And then he got his wish, sure, but in the worst way it could've come about. He moved in, and Techno and Phil started walking on eggshells around him, and Wilbur barely looked at him at all. Tommy acted normal, but he was the only one. Techno came around slowly, which was a relief, gradually going back to the gruff way he'd ignore them and pretend he had to be dragged into doing anything. There's something still missing a little, though. A little bit of enthusiasm you used to be able to drag out of him that hasn't ever come back.

Phil was good, but Tubbo came to realize he wasn't really ever going to be his dad. Tubbo had had a different father for fourteen years, and it's hard to undo something that big. It slips out sometimes anyway, the word "dad," usually parroted by accident after hearing someone

else call him that. Or in a moment of panic when Techno has just passed out in the hall for Tubbo to catch, and Tubbo is not really thinking, just acting.

And then Wilbur.

Wilbur, energetic and charismatic and funny and loud and everything Tubbo wanted from an older brother. Wilbur, who carried Tubbo around on his shoulders when he was littler despite Tommy's complaints that it wasn't fair that Tubbo got carried instead of him. Wilbur, who always treated Tubbo as if he was his favorite little brother, who had *called him that* once or twice, the memories of which still live warm and aching inside of him.

The day Phil signed papers saying they were legally Tubbo's family now, Wilbur had already moved out.

Tubbo learned to let it go. He's learned to let everyone go, because he has never been allowed to hold on. Either he lets go on his own, or his fingers break as everyone he cares about are torn away from him. So he lets Wilbur go and pretends it doesn't sting anymore.

Now Wilbur sits in the driver's seat of Techno's car while Ranboo folds his long legs into the back, laughing and suggesting he trade places with Tubbo. Ranboo turns the idea away, because he's Ranboo and wouldn't ask Tubbo for anything. Wilbur is smiling and laughing. He's here and he's being himself.

This is what Tubbo wanted. This is the family he always wanted.

It's all twisted up into a lump in Tubbo's throat. This is what he wanted and he still thinks he can't have it. It's still wrong. Someone is still missing.

When Tommy gets back, things will be better.

When Tommy gets back.

The movie is exactly what Wilbur explained it to be - some sci-fi action film with way more explosions than plot. There's a fair amount of suspense too, and Ranboo keeps startling in his seat at every mini-jumpscare.

Under the arm rest between them, Tubbo slips his hand down to poke Ranboo's white-knuckled grip on the side of his seat.

"You good, boss man?" he whispers, voice low enough that Wilbur doesn't even look over from his place on Tubbo's other side.

Ranboo glances at Tubbo, and then he lets go of the seat and moves his fingers to latch onto Tubbo's hand instead. He whispers his reply back to Tubbo. "Yeah. It's just a bit loud."

"You wanna go outside for a bit?"



It's a small theatre, just the one auditorium and then a little lobby with the concession stand. There's a couple chairs out there, though, which is where Tubbo is already planning to bring Ranboo. It'll at least be less overwhelming there. He shakes his head, though.

"I wanna see how it ends," he whispers. "I'm fine."

So Tubbo lets it go, trusting Ranboo to say something if he needs to step out later. And if Ranboo squeezes his hand a bit too tightly during the violent scenes, Tubbo isn't going to mention it.

After the movie, they drive out of town to get food. It still just ends up being fast food, but the burgers are at least slightly better than McDonalds. And Wilbur's paying, so Tubbo will take it.

On the way home, driving down the exit towards their hometown, Wilbur points out a gravel path that leads off into the woods. "You know, there's an abandoned mineshaft down that path."

Ranboo makes a noise of polite interest. "That's cool."

Tubbo knows what's coming. You can't bring up the coal mines around Wilbur. He'll talk for ages.

Four years ago, Wilbur helped Tubbo with a school project on coal mines. His strange fascination with them, and their effects on the land and people around them, had been interesting and helpful then. Now, when Tubbo thinks of the abandoned coal mines this town was built around, he associates them so heavily with Wilbur.

"Have you heard of Centralia, Ranboo?" Wilbur asks. Ranboo looks thoughtful.

"Uh, I don't think so." He shakes his head. "Not that I can remember. What is it?"

"It's a town," Wilbur says. "Old mining town with a huge coal mine under it. Back in the sixties, a coal vein in the mine caught fire and spread through the whole thing, so now nobody can live there."

"It's still on fire?"

"Yep. They never were able to put it out and now it's too big, so it'll just keep burning until it runs out of coal to burn." Wilbur speaks in that casual, enrapturing way he has, the one he uses to tell stories that caught up everyone in earshot in a captive audience. Tubbo hasn't heard the tone in a long, long time.

"There are only a few residents left in the town. Everyone else has been chased out by the toxic fumes and unstable land. A kid almost died from a sinkhole that opened right under his feet in his own backyard." Wilbur tilts his head thoughtfully. "Coal mining was terrible for

the environment, you know. Still is. Ruins the land around it, kills the plants and the wildlife and causes countless tragedies.”

“Maybe with Centralia,” Wilbur says, “the land is getting its revenge. It’s still dying, leaking smoke and toxins into the air and water, from a fire started through human negligence. But this time, the land will not die quietly. Now it takes an entire town out with it. In the end, everything cycles back to the beginning where there is nothing.”

“You’re creepy,” Tubbo tells him. Wilbur raises an eyebrow with a half-amused smile.

“It just makes you think,” is all Wilbur says.

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Techno sits in the kitchen, and it is loud and almost normal again.

They’re all sitting together at the table, and Tubbo gestures wildly as he explains a scene from the film he and Ranboo had gone to see. He’s stolen Ranboo’s corduroy jacket which is far too large on him, long sleeves falling over his fingers and flopping about as he waves his hands enthusiastically. The sight is enough to have the faintest hint of a smile playing on Techno’s mouth.

“And then,” Tubbo says, “his head just *fucking explodes!*”

“Eew,” Phil comments. “That’s gross.”

“It was disgusting,” Ranboo agrees, at the same time that Tubbo crows, “It was sick!”

“What was the plot of this movie again?” Techno asks, which entirely details Tubbo’s explanation and sends him right back to the start.

“So there’s a whole bunch of aliens, right,” Tubbo says, and Ranboo puts his head in his hands, slumping against the table.

“Don’t get him started again,” Wilbur says with a grin. Ranboo lets out a whine.

“Please,” he says, his voice full of pitiful, pained weariness. “I don’t want to hear this again.”

Tubbo ignores him and charges ahead with his summary anyway. Ranboo makes fake sobbing noises into his arms.

It’s nice. It’s a moment that feels normal. Techno’s a little too aware of it, has that nagging feeling in the back of his mind that reminds him that things don’t always feel like this, a constant empty ache he can’t forget, but this—this moment is a rest from it all the same.

Tubbo's ramble is abruptly interrupted by the sound of a phone ringing. For a moment, all four of them - save Ranboo - reach for their phones, but it's Phil who speaks up.

"It's mine," he says, and as he does, the smile falls from his face. "I'll just—I've got to take this, hang on."

A silence falls over the room the moment Phil stands up, raising the phone to his ear and stepping away. His voice fades as he walks into the next room, the "*Hello?*" he says barely audible.

His office door closes with a click.

Another moment of silence weighs heavily over the four of them left in the kitchen. Wilbur clears his throat awkwardly.

"Well," he says. "If—"

And that's all he gets out. In the next room, Phil's voice suddenly rises.

"You found *what?*"

There's a sharp note of urgency in his father's voice, and something else too, something that Techno doesn't often hear from him. Panic. Fear.

He and Wilbur make eye contact. Once, he could've just about read Wilbur's mind by a single glance. Even still, they can communicate through looks, but there's something always guarded now.

Wilbur is tense. So is Techno, and he realizes Tubbo is standing frozen-still, his hands still slightly raised.

One second goes by. Two. No one can breathe. It's like for a moment, everyone knows what is about to happen.

The door to Phil's office slams open again. Their father stands in the doorway, eyes wide, phone in hand, and when he speaks, his words come out rushed and scattered.

"Shoes on," Phil says. "There's—his hoodie, they found his hoodie. Or they think it's his, they want us to identify—out in the woods."

The tension between them shatters like a pane of glass. Immediately, everyone is up and moving. Techno's throat feels like it's closing up a little and his breath comes in short and ragged, but he doesn't have time to deal with that right now. He finds his jacket and shoes, tugging them on in a rush.

Behind him, he hears Ranboo. "I'll walk home, it's not dark yet."

"Tomorrow at noon, McDonalds," is all Tubbo says in reply. "Don't forget your jacket."

Out of the corner of his eye, Techno sees Tubbo surge forward to wrap his arms around Ranboo. He turns away and steps out of the kitchen door to give them their moment.

“—find it at?” Wilbur is saying, pulling his own jacket on as he jogs after Phil towards where Phil’s car is parked on the street. Techno catches up with them, Tubbo on his heels a moment later.

“Some hikers called in a tip about it,” Phil says, unlocking the car. They pile in, Techno ending up in the back beside Tubbo. “It’s pretty far down into the woods, but they said they’ve blocked off the trail before it gets there so we can’t miss it.”

“Right.” Wilbur doesn’t say anything else after that. No one does. Phil starts the car and pulls out onto the street in total silence.

Techno feels sick. His stomach twists and turns, but even in this silence, his head is quiet. Beside him, Tubbo’s fingers are dug tightly into his jeans, his expression steeled into something unreadable while his knuckles turn white.

At least this is a lead, Techno thinks to himself. This is something. If it’s actually his—if Tommy’s hoodie is actually somewhere in the middle of the woods, so far from where his phone was...

It’s the most they’ve gotten this entire time. It’s *something*.

The road that leads out of town through the woods gets progressively bumpier and then turns to gravel, and then further still, to dirt. It’s barely more than a glorified path at this point, but Phil hardly slows down, causing the car to jolt and bounce its way through the trees.

Techno keeps an eye on the clock as they go. It takes them about fifteen minutes to reach a section of road blocked off by yellow crime scene tape and a cop car parked in front of it.

They’re really far from town. There’s no way Tommy walked that far.

Phil parks the car and before he even has a chance to turn the key, Tubbo and Wilbur’s doors fly open. Techno follows Tubbo out, and Phil is right behind him.

Through the trees, Techno spots more yellow tape and a few cops standing about. One of them spots the group of people headed towards him and moves forward to meet them halfway.

“Where?” is the first thing Phil says.

“Back this way,” the detective says. “Do you remember what the hoodie he was wearing looked like?”

“White and red zip-up hoodie,” Techno answers before anyone else has a chance. He’s already told someone this, put it on the posters, committed it to memory over and over. “Red hood and sleeves. And he wasn’t wearing it when he left, just carrying it with him.”

“He put it on after,” Tubbo says quietly. Techno looks at him, but he doesn’t look back.

“How do you know that?” the detective questions. Techno knows it’s just how this works, but there’s a note of accusation in his voice that makes him want to step between the man and his brother.

Tubbo’s quiet for a moment before he answers. “Looked out the window and saw him walking away with it on.”

This is the first Techno’s heard of this. He frowns.

“Can we please see the hoodie?” Phil interrupts impatiently. “Was there anything else with it? What does it mean that it was found all the way out here?”

“It’s right over here.” The detective gestures the group over, but stops them again in front of more yellow tape. “Please don’t try to touch or grab it, we’re going to take it back to the lab for...”

That’s all Techno hears. On the other side of the tape, he catches a glimpse of red and white fabric, surrounded by leaves that have been brushed away to fully reveal the garment.

Techno’s heart is in his throat. His stomach twists and turns.

It’s his. The hoodie is Tommy’s, red hood and sleeves and white front, or a front that *used* to be white.

Now, dark stains cover what Techno can see of it.

“It’s his,” Techno says, and it surprises him how steady his voice comes out.

“There’s blood on it,” Phil says, his voice strangled. “There’s—”

“There are no tears in it, though,” the officer says. “Whatever the blood’s from, it’s not an injury we’d be able to deduce from that. Now that we know it’s his, we’ll run tests to determine that it’s his blood and if there are any other traces on it, and go from there.”

Wilbur’s hand is over his mouth and his eyes are wide. Tubbo’s fingers dig white-knuckled into the sides of his shirt, arms folded around himself. Techno thinks he’s going to throw up.

Everything is a little fuzzy around him. Sounds come from somewhere far away, like he’s underwater, and his breath comes in quick, rushed bursts. Ever so distantly, he can make out people still talking.

“—reason for it to be all the way out here?” someone is saying. “Have you looked around the whole area...”

Tommy’s hoodie lays on the ground just a few feet from him. Bloodstains paint all over it.

He has a glimpse of Tommy standing in front of him, red running through his hair and down his face and dripping onto his hoodie and shirt.

*“You still haven’t found me,” Tommy says.*

“...no other sign. It’s possible a kidnapper could’ve left it here to dispose of...”

Fuck. *Fuck*, Techno feels sick. The world is wavery and watery around him, and his head feels heavy despite the silence in it, and his stomach just keeps twisting. He turns to find Tubbo still standing beside him - of course he is, why would Tubbo have moved? His head feels fuzzy - and Phil is only a few feet away, Wilbur at his side.

“Mr. Watson, I’m not going to beat around the bush,” the detective says. “As things are right now, it looks highly unlikely that we’re going to find Tommy alive. We’re not going to stop looking for him, and it’s not impossible that he’s still alive. But I need you and your family to prepare for that possibility.”

Techno cannot breathe. He’s sick and he can’t breathe and his head feels oddly empty even though he still hears Tommy asking the same question over and over. *Why haven’t you found me yet? Techno, aren’t you looking? Why haven’t you found me?*

Tubbo is frozen in place beside him, stiff and still as a block of ice. Despite their distance, Techno can see the way Wilbur’s shoulders are beginning to tremble.

And in this moment, Techno has a front row seat to watch something inside of his father completely shatter.

“You don’t *know*,” Phil says, and his voice shakes dangerously. “You don’t know, you don’t know who took him and you haven’t even looked everywhere—”

“We *are* looking,” the detective says. “I understand this is difficult—”

“I’d say it’s fucking difficult!” Phil snaps. “My son is *missing* and you and whatever other incompetent assholes are working on his case have turned up fucking *nothing*! It’s been over a week, it’s been more than a goddamn week and this is the *first* bit of evidence you’ve found at all.”

“Mr. Watson,” the detective says, both hands raised in a placating gesture. Phil’s outburst has caught the attention of another officer too, who starts to make his way over as well. “Maybe you should take your family home and rest. These are stressful times—”

“Goddamn *look* for him!” Phil’s voice rises, nearly a shout. Wilbur reaches out one hand, mouth halfway opened to say something, but before he can get a word out, Phil’s arm rises too, knocking Wilbur’s hand away from him. “*Someone* has him, someone knows where he is, fucking find out who that person is!”

“Come on, Dad,” Wilbur says just louder than under his breath, at the same time the detective starts to look pissed off. “Let’s just go home.”

“There isn’t anything else to find here,” the new officer says, sharper than the first. “We’ve already scouted the area. Go home.”

Phil is seething. Techno can see it in the set of his teeth, the way his eyes flash. His father is barely restraining himself from a much, *much* angrier string of words.

“Fine,” is all he hissed out instead. “*Fine.*”

“We’ll call the moment we have any new information for you,” the detective says, his voice flat. Phil ignores him and turns on his heel.

That’s their cue to go. Techno and Tubbo follow along behind. When they get to the car, Phil and Wilbur are already inside.

A long moment stretches out in silence. Techno’s nearly holding his breath, trying to settle the aching panic in his chest. Wilbur says quietly, “Are you okay?”

At first, Techno thinks about an answer. But before he can say anything, his father answers first and Techno realizes Wilbur hadn’t been talking to him.

“Fine,” Phil says shortly. He starts the car and he says nothing else.

When they get home, sun setting behind the trees they’d just left, Phil bids them all a curt goodnight. He leaves the three of them standing in the kitchen. Upstairs, his bedroom door closes with a sharp thump.

It’s just Techno and his brothers now, all but one, standing in this kitchen with a heavy, heavy weight pressing on all of their shoulders. Or at least on Techno’s. He thinks the others *have* to feel it too. Tubbo’s fingers are still white-knuckled and gripping his sleeves. Wilbur’s eyes look distant, as if he’s looking somewhere further away.

“We should...” Wilbur starts, and his voice falters. He pauses, tries again. “Maybe we should talk about this.”

“About what?” Tubbo asks, his voice low and tired.

“About Tommy,” Wilbur says. “About everything. We haven’t talked at all except for yelling at each other.”

Techno knows that’s a jab directed at him, but he doesn’t care. The frustration he’s been carrying towards Wilbur just isn’t there anymore. He’s tired. He’s lost one brother already.

“I don’t know what there is to talk about.” Tubbo shifts his weight from foot to foot.

“Tommy’s missing. We have to find him so he can come home. So unless you have a lead you wanted to talk about...”

Wilbur lets out a tiny sigh. “That’s... what I mean, Tubbo. You heard what the detective told Dad. It’s been awhile and we just... we don’t have much... we have to start accepting the idea that—”

“Tommy’s *not* dead,” Tubbo interrupts. His voice rises, and his hands are in fists now. “He’s not. I’m not gonna just fucking give up on him if that’s what you want me to do.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“He’s out there,” Tubbo says. “I’ll find him myself if I have to, since nobody else seems to be interested in doing anything about it.”

“Tubbo,” Wilbur starts.

Something clicks in Techno’s head.

“You said he put on the hoodie after he left,” Techno says abruptly. Both Wilbur and Tubbo stop and look at him, as if remembering he’s in the room at all. “How did you know that?”

Tubbo blinks. “Said I looked out the window.”

“But you didn’t,” Techno says. “You got in bed before I left the room and when I checked on you later, you hadn’t moved at all. I remember.”

Tubbo meets Techno’s eyes for a moment. Then, he abruptly turns and walks out of the kitchen.

“You can’t just leave,” Wilbur says, arms folded.

“Just wait there!” Tubbo calls back from the stairs.

Techno takes the opportunity to sink into a chair at the kitchen table. He’s really hoping the sick stomach and shaky knees thing is just... anxiety and a little bit leftover from being sick this week. Not a relapse. He’s not eager to do that again.

Even the whispering has been quiet the past couple days. He’s kicked whatever was going on, although it’s left him with an uncomfortable sort of audible silence living in his head instead.

When Tubbo gets back, he has Techno’s laptop under one arm and a flash drive in the other. He sets up on the kitchen table beside Techno, opening the laptop and typing in the password.

“Very cool that you know my password which I have never given you,” Techno comments. Tubbo doesn’t reply to that.

“Look.” He connects the flash drive and opens a file on it, pulling up a blurry video of... their street?

Techno frowns. Wilbur moves around to the other side of the table, peering over Techno and Tubbo’s shoulders.

“Where did you get this?”

“Connor,” Tubbo says. “He has a doorbell camera, and I got him to give me a copy of the footage from that night.”

Wilbur stares at Tubbo. “And you didn’t think to *tell us*?”

“I would’ve told you if I found anything,” Tubbo says, a note of defense entering his voice. “I’ve been through the entire video, over and over again. There’s barely anything, it’s too



blurry to make out license plates on the cars and there's no one else who walks by at anywhere near the same time as Tommy. I--"

"We could've done something with it anyway," Wilbur says.

"Like give it to the police?" Tubbo challenges. "Let them take this away too and tell us to stay out of it and let them handle things?"

"No," Wilbur says forcefully. "That's not what I was going to say. We both know they don't do shit. They've never found anyone in those woods."

The words leave Wilbur so abruptly and sharply that it takes Techno by surprise. Tubbo's face twists up, frustrated and relieved and hurt all at once. Even though Techno thinks he might be one of the people who knows Tubbo best, he still can't always tell what he's thinking.

For a moment, there's silence, and it looks like Wilbur might regret saying it like that.

"Right," Tubbo says quietly. "I know that. So I just... I kept it."

"We're looking for him too," Techno says. "It's not you against the world, Tubbo."

Tubbo digs his fingers into the edge of the table. "I know. I *know*."

The sun is setting outside. It's getting dark. In the hall, a clock ticks, just quiet enough to be heard in this lull of silence between them.

"Okay," Wilbur says. "Let's watch this again."

Tonight, Techno's mind is so, so quiet.

He lays in bed, staring up at the ceiling, and he can't shake the feeling that he's done something wrong.

In his head is nothing but quiet, and he should be *glad* for that. That's supposed to be a good thing. It's what he wants, what he's wanted - just... peace. Quiet. His own thoughts and nothing else. But past the quiet, there's something that feels like it's lurking just underneath it, and it's from that lurking silence that Techno gets the feeling that he's done something very, very wrong.

Earlier, Phil had said something to that detective that floats around Techno's mind now. "*This is the first bit of evidence you've found.*"

This is the first lead. A pile of bloody fabric dumped in the woods and soaked in rain water and mud.

Techno thinks, in a split second thought, that it's not their first lead. Techno's the one who's been closest to finding Tommy this whole time.

Because Techno's been hearing someone talk to him. Techno's had someone tell him, in more or less words, that Tommy is *still here*, somewhere nearby, somewhere just close enough for Techno to feel but not quite reach. Something is in his head, in his dreams, and it knows where Tommy is.

He's even seen Tommy. With blood on his face and hair and running onto his clothes - and his hoodie had been stained with blood that Techno already knew would be there. Not from an injury anywhere his hoodie would've covered, but dripping down from his head. And Techno already knew. Techno had already seen it.

This isn't a fevered hallucination or a stress-fueled nightmare. This is real. This *has* to be real.

If he closes his eyes, he can picture the last time he'd seen Tommy. Not in his bedroom, arguing with Tubbo - but sitting in a dark, empty space with his knees against his chest and his eyes turned grey and lifeless. He can picture himself, frozen and panicked and unable to move, and he remembers fighting it. Phantom hands remind him of something grabbing him, pulling him down, coaxing him into compliance, and he'd *fought it*.

When he'd first heard the voices, they wanted something from him, and they'd let him see Tommy in return. He'd fought them, and now they're gone. It feels like Tommy is gone too.

He fucked up.

*Fuck*, he'd fucked up. He needs—

He needs another chance. He gets up, grabs his glasses from the window ledge beside his bed, trades his pajamas out for jeans and a jacket, and he slips from his room as quietly as he can.

The lights are off everywhere in the house. In the kitchen, the clock on the oven glows 3:27 and the only other light is a street lamp outside, filtering through a window. There is no one else awake.

He leaves a note stuck to the fridge under a magnet. Just in case.

*Be back soon. Went to look for something.*

He'll be back before any of them notice it, and he'll take it down and throw it away before anyone has a chance to be even slightly concerned. It's just in case.

Keys in hand, he steps outside into the frozen middle of the night cold. Heavy clouds block out the stars and the moon. It's going to rain again, but it's not now. He has time.

He hopes everyone inside is sound enough asleep that they don't hear the car start. Or if they do, they pass it off as a neighbor and don't bother to look around.

And then he's in the woods.

He doesn't remember it, doesn't remember parking or turning off the car, but he's here, so he must have. He doesn't have time to worry about it.

It's bitingly cold, but it doesn't make his hands shake. He climbs over yellow tape, and twigs and leaves crunch under feet. The trees above him block out even the faintest amount of light from the sky. It's *so dark*.

Tommy's hoodie is gone, but the leaves it had been lying in are still there. All brushed aside, leaving an empty space in the dirt where some random hikers had found it.

There's no other sign it was ever here. If it weren't for the yellow tape blocking off the whole area, Techno doesn't think he would have found it.

He sinks to his knees here in the leaves and dirt. Tiny twigs and stones dig into his legs, and the cold starts to seep into him from the ground up.

"Okay," Techno says, murmuring more to himself than anything. "I'm here. What do you want?"

He waits.

He waits for something he doesn't know to recognize. A whisper, maybe. The now-familiar sensation of prickling on his neck and a presence behind him and voices overlapping in a quiet indecipherable hum.

Or a glimpse of something. Of his brother, of a dark empty space and an inability to move, to speak, to breathe. A feeling, hands wrapped around his arms and his neck and his hair and everywhere, tugging and guiding him until he lets go of himself entirely.

A sense of *something*. The feeling that Tommy is here, and not so far out of his reach that Techno will never feel it ever again.

"I'm here," Techno says again, and then louder. "I'm here! What do you want from me?"

He's met with silence. It's in his head, in his throat, utter silence that seems to be mocking him.

*Is this what you wanted?* the silence taunts. *Are you happy now?*

"No," Techno says. Panic and frustration rise in his throat, strangling and desperate. "No, no! Please, just—give me something! Let me see him again."

Wind picks up, rustling the leaves at his sides. It grabs at his hair, loose over his shoulders and in his face, and it whistles in his ears, and it laughs. It laughs at him, and Techno is kneeling in the dirt over Tommy's bloodstained hoodie and he can't hear him, he can't feel him, he can't see him.

“*Please!*” His voice is a shout that stings in his throat. “*Fuck*, please, just let me see him—let me try again, please, *please*, whatever you want—”

He’s rambling and desperate, and in this moment, he truly will do *anything* they ask of him for another glimpse of Tommy. He needs to see him. He needs him to be alive.

The wind laughs in his ears and the silence taunts him, and all the while, a new feeling starts to take root in his chest. There is something growing there, an aching emptiness, and Techno feels as if he can’t breathe.

He’s dizzy. The ground beneath him feels less like ground and more like water, and he’s sinking into it. Something fills his lungs, fills his whole chest, and he can’t breathe. He’s gasping, desperate for air, his throat stings and tears are hot on his face. It’s squeezing and expanding in his chest, and now it *hurts*. Techno curls in on himself, wheezing cries forced out of his crushed lungs.

The wind laughs. *Like this?* the silence taunts. *Is this what you want?*

He doesn’t have the breath to reply. It’s already dark, but now blurry spots crowd the edges of his vision. He can’t see the ground beneath his knees. He can’t quite feel it anymore, can’t feel anything, even the cold is gone and replaced by an aching suffocating nothing.

This is going to kill him. Oh, god, he’s gonna die here alone.

Maybe they’ll find him. Maybe he’ll be the first one they do find in these woods, suffocated to death by something growing in his chest right here over his brother’s bloodied jacket.

He’s going to die here. He can’t breathe. The wind laughs.

It laughs, it laughs, a multitude of overlapped voices whispering their amusement as Techno strains to hold on to the last of his consciousness. All he can hear is them.

All he can hear is *them*.

He’s still fighting. He’s still holding on and trying to draw in one more breath, just one more, and they laugh and laugh...

It hits him. He’s not going to die here.

*Give me Tommy*, he thinks. *Give me Tommy, you fucking bitch*.

And he lets go.

He’s in his room.

Carpet digs into his knees, into the palms of his hands. Like he’s man drowned, he gasps for breath, and it stings in lungs unused to air. He’s too desperate to savor the first breath, but he

takes in the second one slower, filling out his lungs with room in his chest that he'll never again take for granted. Breathe in. Breathe out.

He's in his room. It's dark outside his window; no stars, no moon, no sign of the sun. There is no wind here, but in his ears, he can hear them.

A quiet whisper. Not a laugh anymore. They're not laughing now.

Techno is. He laughs, hoarse and cracked and quiet; he laughs with tears still on his face and his chest still aching empty. There's a familiar sort of panic living in him, but it's easier to appreciate now. It's there and this time, it's a relief.

Tommy is nearby. He can feel it. He can feel him again, like a quiet presence in the back of his head, a humming anxiety inside of his empty chest. An extra heartbeat, an extra set of veins, something a little too full and a little too vacant all at once.

No one will believe him, but this is *Techno's* chance to find his brother.

He has a lead.

## Chapter End Notes

two outta three

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

*"Tommy's not gone," he wants to say. "I think he's nearby. I think if I close my eyes and let myself go, I'll find him again."*

And then Tubbo will look at him like he's lost his mind, and maybe Techno has. There is no explanation for this that makes sense, that could explain why this morning, his car had still been parked in the driveway. There was never any note on the fridge. He doesn't have a fever again; he checked.

It could've been a dream, a stress-fueled incredibly vivid nightmare. But that doesn't explain how he can still hear Tommy's heartbeat in his head.

## Chapter Notes

HELLO EVERYONE happy wednesday update!! i was going to save this one for sunday but 1) i'm impatient and 2) it's a shorter one so i didn't want to make you guys wait longer for it.

i also wanted to mention bc i forgot to last chapter, the BIGGEST thank yous to everyone who has been leaving kudos, comments, bookmarks, etc on this fic! this fic is breaking all of my own personal records in terms of hits, comments, and even wordcount - 50k and we're halfway through the fic... it's gonna be a long one boys. thank you all so, so much for the encouragement you've been giving me as i write this, it's become one of my favorite things i've ever written and i'm so happy you've all been enjoying it too. all the theories and reactions, the commenters who show up every chapter and whose ao3 names i recognize and get excited to see in my inbox, almost 150 (!!!!!) subscribers who signed up to get email notifications whenever a new chapter is posted - holy shit, guys. you're all so sweet and i appreciate you so much. thank you all <3

SAPPY NOTE OUT OF THE WAY.

warning in this chapter for discussion of hallucinations/derealization - it's more of techno's voices, which i haven't been fully sure if i needed to warn for, but better safe than sorry. take care of yourselves!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, Techno sits at the table as Tubbo walks downstairs. He's got his backpack on over his shoulders, and he hesitates in the doorway for a moment, long eye contact between

them both.

“Good morning,” Techno greets him. It’s after eleven, but it counts. It was a late night for all of them.

“Morning,” Tubbo echoes back.

The exchange is so simple. Casual. As if this is just any other morning after any other night. As if they weren’t up well past midnight watching and rewatching the footage Tubbo had gotten from Connor. As if Techno’s whole world had not turned over on itself last night, leaving an empty ache in his chest and a second heartbeat in the back of his head, beating in time to his own.

That’s something he’s still getting accustomed to. It’s less unsettling than the whispering had been, at least.

Tubbo still stands hesitantly in the doorway. He watches Techno with a studying gaze.

“Are you doing okay?”

Techno blinks. “Yeah. Why?”

“You zoned out for like, five minutes right there,” Tubbo says. “I asked if you had breakfast already.”

“Oh.” That’s probably not great. “Yeah, I ate earlier. You want something?”

Tubbo shakes his head. “No, I’m meeting Ranboo at McDonalds. I’ll get food there.”

Techno frowns. “You’re still meeting Ranboo today?”

“Why, is that a problem?” The way Tubbo says it is careful and guarded, immediately on defense at the slightest hint of criticism. Techno makes a conscious effort to relax his expression.

“No,” he says, carefully choosing his next words around the extra noise in his head. “I was just surprised that you would want to leave, with... everything.”

Tubbo’s still bristled, but his words say something else. “If you need me to stay home, I will.”

He can’t get out what he’s trying to express. He’s not really even sure what it is, what with losing track of his train of thought every few moments. It’s like the fuzzy sleep-deprived feeling he’d grown used to last week, except that what’s distracting him isn’t his body begging for sleep, but the feeling that his little brother is close enough to touch everywhere he goes.

“No,” Techno says again, finally. “Have fun with Ranboo. You want me to drive you?”

“I’m good.” Tubbo slips his shoes on at the door.

“Text me if you change your mind later,” Techno says. “It might rain again.”

“Okay,” Tubbo says. And then he stands longer by the door, like he’s waiting for something else.

For a moment, the idea of telling him presses at Techno’s tongue.

*“Tommy’s not gone,”* he wants to say. *“I think he’s nearby. I think if I close my eyes and let myself go, I’ll find him again.”*

And then Tubbo will look at him like he’s lost his mind, and maybe Techno *has* . There is no explanation for this that makes sense, that could explain why this morning, his car had still been parked in the driveway. There was never any note on the fridge. He doesn’t have a fever again; he checked.

It could’ve been a dream, a stress-fueled incredibly vivid nightmare. But that doesn’t explain how he can *still hear* Tommy’s heartbeat in his head.

He doesn’t tell Tubbo. He raises a hand in a wave, and then his brother steps out the door, and he is alone in the kitchen again.

Later, after Tubbo has been gone for an hour or two, Techno is upstairs and he hears a noise that makes him freeze in place.

From down the hall, there is a quiet strum of guitar strings.

It catches in Techno’s throat, and it feels like his heart stops for an awful, sick moment. For a split second, he feels like he’s years younger, when this sound was a familiar soundtrack, when it was uncomfortable to hear silence instead of music.

The music does not come from Wilbur’s room, but from the one Tommy and Tubbo share. The door is half-closed, blocking his view of the inside, and Techno hesitates outside.

The sound of the instrument is one of a cheap beginner’s guitar, but the musician playing it shows their skill on the imperfect instrument. There is no stumbling, no hesitance between the strumming pattern and smooth transition to plucking strings. It is quiet, but never unsure.

And then, abruptly, the music stops.

“You can come in,” Wilbur says from the other side of the door. Techno carefully eases the door open the rest of the way and steps inside.

Wilbur sits on Tommy’s bed. Their littlest brother’s guitar rests on his lap.

Something turns in his stomach.

“I don’t want to interrupt,” Techno says. “I can go.”



“Don’t.” The word comes out in a rush, and when Techno meets his twin’s gaze, there’s a hint of something desperate in his eyes. Wilbur looks away just as quickly. “You can stay.”

Techno nods. Wilbur looks back down at the guitar in his hands. None of them know what to say now.

Tommy’s bed is made. It hadn’t been the night he left, and there had been clothes and other clutter strewn across his side of the room, but it’s all been tidied up now. Techno’s not sure who did it or when. He knows Tubbo avoids their room like the plague, so probably not him. Techno can’t blame him, of course. Techno already feels like running from the room now.

A rustling of fabric catches his attention. Wilbur shifts to the side, leaving an empty space on Tommy’s bed beside him, and he lightly pats the top of the comforter.

Techno sits.

Silence stretches out between them. Neither of them seem to know how to fill it, far too out of practice with being together. Techno thinks this is the closest they’ve sat beside one another - side by side, nearly close enough to touch - in years and years.

Wilbur is the one who finally speaks.

“I remembered what you said.” He rearranges his fingers on the frets of the guitar. “About Tommy learning guitar. I thought... I don’t know. That I’d sit in here and play it, and... and... god, I wish he could show me what he could play.”

Wilbur’s voice cracks. Techno’s fingers tighten on his knees, digging into the denim of his jeans.

“Was he good at it?”

Techno shrugs. His throat feels tight. “He was learning. Got frustrated a lot but kept going back to it.”

Wilbur gives a short chuckle, low and tinged with tears. “Stubborn fucker.”

“Yeah.”

As they speak, Wilbur’s hands continue to hover over the strings of the guitar, but he doesn’t play it again. It stays silent in his lap, and as it does, his shoulders tremble and Techno hears him draw in a shaky breath.

“I wish I could’ve heard him play,” he whispers, hardly audible over the way his voice wobbles. “I—I feel like I’ve missed so much, and now I can’t make it up, and I...”

Techno doesn’t know what to do. This is what he’d wanted, isn’t it? A bit of honest, genuine emotion from Wilbur, for him to open up and talk to Techno, for them to be *brothers*. To trust one another enough to be vulnerable again.

But now, sitting here with Wilbur nearly in tears beside him, Techno feels like bolting from the room and hiding somewhere he won't be found. The uneasy ache in his chest only grows stronger.

Wilbur is still talking. Techno's missed some of the words.

"...feel like a stranger. I feel like I don't even know my own family anymore, and now I've lost the chance with Tommy, and I just..."

"You know why," Techno says quietly, keeping his voice steady. "That's not our fault."

"I know," Wilbur says, and he just sounds tired. "I know it's my fault. I—I don't have anything good to say about it, Techno, I get it. I hurt you. But you... I had to. It's what I had to do."

"Why?" Techno pushes. "Did someone *make* you leave and cut us all off?"

"You don't get it," Wilbur says. Frustration rises in Techno's throat.

"You're right," he says, "I don't. I don't get it at all, and you don't ever bother to explain so I guess I'll just never get it."

"That's not—" Wilbur starts, but Techno cuts him off.

"Not what, Wil? Is it not *fair*?" Techno's heart beats loudly in his ears, and with it, he can hear the faintest beat of an echo. "Does it hurt, that when you cut people off, eventually they stop trying to understand why?"

"You *don't understand anything*," Wilbur hisses, his voice low but shaking, and if Techno's chest weren't as empty as it is, it would cut straight into his heart.

For a moment, neither of them say anything. Wilbur's words hang over them, but he doesn't add to them. Instead, he breathes a shuddering breath and he reaches up a hand to—

Oh.

Wilbur wipes angry tears from his face. He still says nothing.

"Then let me understand," Techno says, finally, quietly. "I just want to know why."

"I can't." Wilbur's tone is cold now. "There's nothing to—there's nothing that can make you get it. I don't have an answer, I can't make it—it won't just all fall into place. It's just *me*."

Techno's head is loud. His chest is empty. Everything itches in him to get up and go, frustration scratching inside of him and impatience crawling through his throat.

"There's something broken—in me, and it's just—and it's just me," Wilbur says. "I don't have an answer. I'm sorry."

"Okay," Techno says. "Fine."

“I’m sorry.”

He’s going to say something else - something he might regret later, something that snaps off his tongue with intent to cause damage - but his phone buzzes in his pocket and interrupts him instead.

It’s from Tubbo, and Techno realizes with a wash of cold anxiety that he’d missed messages from him earlier too.

*(12:55) tubbo: ranboo hasn’t shown up. do you think you could drive me to his house if he still isn’t here soon*

*(1:12) tubbo: he’s still not here*

*(1:15) tubbo: techno answer*

“Shit,” Techno breathes as he gets to his feet. “I gotta go.”

---

Tubbo is sitting outside of McDonalds and he is trying very hard not to cry.

Ranboo was not here when he got here, even though Tubbo was five minutes late, and that was immediately worrying on its own. Ranboo’s never late. He stood around outside and waited for another fifteen minutes, and then he went inside and asked Sapnap if he’d seen him. The answer was no, so Tubbo waited inside a while longer and then went outside again.

He’s texted Techno three times, and he hasn’t answered any of them. Tubbo is trying to not catastrophize, but that is not easy when Ranboo is *still not here* and Techno is not answering and Tubbo suddenly feels incredibly alone. The concrete sidewalk is cold and the clouds are heavy and grey and the wind is picking up and there is still a list of names in Tubbo’s backpack and a Tommy is missing and his hoodie was covered in blood in the woods and Tubbo hasn’t found *anything*.

So he’s sitting outside of McDonalds and sniffing to himself and generally feeling miserable.

“Your date stand you up?”

Tubbo turns his head to the voice behind him. Sapnap stands by the door, paper bag in one hand and head tilted a little.

“Not funny,” Tubbo says, and he scrubs his eyes with one hand. Sapnap softens immediately. He holds the bag out to Tubbo.

“Sorry,” he says. “Just trying to cheer you up. Here, I stole you a chicken sandwich and some cookies.”

Tubbo accepts the bag, but he doesn't open it yet. He's not hungry, too stressed and upset, but he'd feel bad turning it down. "You're gonna get fired for stealing one day."

"They'll have to catch me first." Sapnap gives Tubbo a half smile, opening the door and catching it on his foot. "Come inside and warm up if you get cold waiting, okay?"

"Okay," Tubbo says. "Thanks."

It takes another ten minutes before Techno's car pulls into the parking lot, despite the fact he'd never answered him. Tubbo stands up to walk over, but Techno gets out and jogs over to meet him first.

"Nice of you to text back," Tubbo says. A flash of confusion crosses Techno's eyes. He digs his phone from his back pocket, peering at it with eyebrows furrowed.

"Oh," he says. "I could've sworn I sent something."

"You would be mistaken." Tubbo folds his arms over his chest. Techno rubs his forehead with one hand.

Techno has not been acting normal today. He's been acting off for the last week and a half, of course, but today is... today is *especially* wrong. Tubbo is not stupid. Something's wrong.

"I'm sorry." Techno's hand stays on his forehead. "Okay. What... what happened? What's going on with Ranboo?"

"I don't know." The wind is really starting to pick up, and it'll be bringing the rain in with it. Tubbo shivers. "He was supposed to meet me here an hour and a half ago, and he never showed up. He's never, ever been late to anything before, let alone miss it entirely, and I don't have any way to get ahold of him because he doesn't have a phone and I don't know where he lives."

Techno doesn't answer. His eyes are closed, lips drawn in a frown, and his hand is still frozen against his forehead.

"Techno."

His eyes snap open then, finding Tubbo's face. "What?"

Tubbo's eyes narrow. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Techno says, too quickly. "Sorry. It just got really loud."

Tubbo stares at him. "What?"

Techno looks lost. "What?"

"It got *loud*?"

"Oh," Techno says. "No, I mean, it—uh, I don't know. What's... so Ranboo..."

Tubbo doesn't know whether he should be more annoyed or concerned right now. "You're not listening to me at all."

"I am," Techno insists without an ounce of evidence to back it up. "You—you said..."

And then he trails off again, voice going silent as his words stop mid-sentence and his gaze fixes on nothing, somewhere over Tubbo's shoulder. Tubbo even looks behind him, but there's nothing there but the McDonalds and dark storm clouds.

The sky above them rapidly grows darker. Tubbo feels the first drop of rain on his face.

"Techno," he says again. His brother barely reacts this time.

"It's really loud," Techno mumbles, and Tubbo thinks he's saying it to himself, not for anyone else to hear. Techno's breath hitches, shoulders rising with the effort of it. "They... they haven't done this before."

Yeah, Tubbo's definitely worried now.

"'They?' Techno, what the hell are you saying?"

His older brother's mouth moves in a soundless answer, and his eyes don't lose that confused, far-away look in them. Panic starts to root itself in Tubbo's chest. He had no idea what this is or what to do, and Techno looks so lost and he doesn't know what to do to get him back.

"It's gonna start pouring," Tubbo says, trying to keep his voice steady and reassuring. "Let's go inside and figure this out, okay?"

One hand reaches out towards Tubbo, maybe just instinctive response to his voice, maybe something else, and Tubbo catches it immediately, letting him latch on. He goes to take a step back, to lead Techno out of the parking lot and into the building, or at least onto the sidewalk under the awning and out of the rain.

And then Techno crumples.

Tubbo is not fast enough to catch him. Techno's on his knees, hands over his ears, curled in on himself. Ragged, harsh breaths leave his mouth, and his whole body trembles.

"Holy shit," Tubbo says, dropping down beside him. "Fuck, Techno, hey, it's okay, can you hear me? I'm right here, what's going on—"

"They're so *loud*," Techno says, and when he says it, it sounds like a sob. His voice is cracked and breaking, and it sounds so unlike Techno that Tubbo can't help the feeling of *wrongness* that fills him. "They—they—they didn't do this before, this is different, this isn't what it was like before, they're all yelling..."

"Techno," Tubbo says again, trying to interrupt the stream of words babbling out of him.

"Techno. Hey. It's okay, listen to me, I don't know what's going on but it's going to be okay —"

“*No.*” The word leaves him with such force that it stops Tubbo’s voice in his throat. “No, no no no. They want him. They want him.”

Tubbo feels like there is static in his veins. He feels cold. He feels water hitting his head and his face and running down his neck. “Who? Techno, who are you talking about?”

Techno doesn’t answer. He’s still mumbling to himself, but now the only words Tubbo can catch are the same three repeated over and over - *they want him*.

A hand rests on Tubbo's shoulder, and he nearly jumps out of his skin. When he looks up, it’s just Sapnap, rain running down his face with his headset still on.

“What’s going on?” Sapnap asks. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Tubbo says, and the way his voice shakes makes him realize that *all* of him is shaking now. “He just—he just started doing this, I don’t know, I don’t understand what he’s saying.”

“Okay,” Sapnap says, quick but steady. “Let’s bring him inside out of the rain, okay? You go on that side and get one arm over your shoulder and I’ll take this side.”

Tubbo does as instructed, and Techno doesn’t fight it. When Tubbo loops his arm over his shoulders, he can feel Techno’s fingers dig into the fabric of his jacket, clinging on. Tubbo hopes he understands what’s going on. He hopes it’s reassuring.

“Up you come, Techie,” Sapnap says, using the nickname Techno’s always hated. Together, the two of them lift him to his feet. It’s clumsy moving him inside, with Techno stumbling over his own feet on the way there, but they finally manage to get him through the door and out of the rain.

Inside, they lead Techno to a table and let him collapse onto one booth seat. Techno crumples again, head on the table and both arms wrapped over it. All Tubbo can see of him is damp pink hair and trembling shoulders. He’s stopped talking, at least audibly. Now he’s just shaking.

Tubbo stands there catching his own breath and dripping rainwater, and Sapnap does the same beside him.

“What do you want me to do?” Sapnap asks. “I can call your dad, or an ambulance, or... or something.”

“I don’t know,” Tubbo says numbly. “I don’t... He did this last week but he was sick then, and it wasn’t as bad; he didn’t say things like this, I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll call your dad,” Sapnap says. “He’ll know what to do better than us.”

At that, Techno makes a noise, still hidden beneath his own arms. “M fine. Don’t call him.”

“You’re not, man,” Sapnap says. “I don’t know what that was, but you—”

“ *Please.* ”

Sapnap looks to Tubbo, a question on his face. Tubbo hates that he's the one to make this decision. This is way too much. Everything weighs heavily on his shoulders and it's so much pressure, and this simple question feels like *too much*.

Tubbo sits down in the seat across from Techno. “Fine.”

Sapnap looks between Techno and Tubbo, and then he nods. “Okay. Just sit for awhile and rest, Techno. You too, Tubbo. I'll be at the counter, shout if you need anything.”

Tubbo just nods in response. Hesitantly, Sapnap leaves them alone at this table in the corner of the McDonalds. A long moment passes, and then another.

“You lied, didn't you?” Tubbo leans forward, chin on his own arms against the table, peering at his brother. “The other night when you were looking up hallucinations, and you said it was for school. You lied.”

Techno breathes shakily. He doesn't answer.

Tubbo turns his head. Outside, rain pours down in sheets, drenching the sidewalk and the asphalt and sending up a mist that partially obscures anything further away than the edge of the parking lot. In the center of a puddle is the paper bag of food Sapnap had given him earlier, abandoned in Tubbo's rush to help Techno.

There's nothing he can do but sit here now. He feels both exhausted and like he's about to explode, wound down tightly he might combust. He doesn't know where Ranboo is. Something is very wrong with Techno. He hasn't made any progress on finding Tommy and now it's raining too hard to work on it today.

Everything is a mess and all he can do is sit at this table and wait for Techno to speak.

Sapnap sneaks them cookies and drinks. He hands one to Tubbo, and then pushes the other across the table until it bumps against Techno's hand and leaves it there. Techno's hand twitches in response, but he doesn't make any move to sit up or take the drink.

It takes another fifteen minutes before the arms clasped over Techno's head to loosen and move, and then finally he picks his head up off the table and sits up.

He looks like hell. His eyes are red and puffy behind his glasses, tear tracks stained on his cheeks. He won't make eye contact with Tubbo, instead reaching for the drink Sapnap had left for him and focusing his attention on it instead.

Tubbo lets him have a minute or two longer before he speaks. “You want to explain?”

Techno's shoulders draw in, hunched and defensive. “Just panicked.”

“I know what a panic attack looks like,” Tubbo says. “You were talking about someone. About hearing something and it being loud.”

Techno winces. “It’s not a hallucination.”

“Okay.” Tubbo lays his hand on the table, gesturing with his palm up. “So it’s just something you can hear that no one else can and isn’t there.”

“I know it sounds dumb.” Techno rubs the side of his head. “I can’t explain it, but it’s... it’s not. It’s something else.”

Tubbo watches him for one moment. Two. “All right. Then explain something else. What were you hearing? And what did you mean, what were you saying—they want him? Who are they and who’s him?”

“I... I don’t know,” Techno admits. “It’s not... it’s not clear when they’re talking. They sound like a bunch of whispers, usually, all overlapped and you can’t tell what they’re saying, but sometimes you can feel what they mean. And outside, they... they just started screaming. They wanted something. Someone.”

This is... this is terrifying. Tubbo has no idea what to do. “You’re serious about this.”

Techno looks him in the eye, expression steady and tired. “Do you think I’d make this up?”

“You have to tell Phil,” Tubbo says. Techno shakes his head.

“He’s already stressed. He doesn’t need one more thing to worry about.”

“Techno. You are hallucinating voices whispering in your head. Do you *realize* how serious that is?”

“It’s *not* hallucinations,” Techno says, more insistent but voice carefully lowered. “I’ve considered that possibility, trust me, but that’s not what it is. I don’t know how I can get you to believe me, but that’s the truth.”

Tubbo doesn’t know what to say. He’s known Techno hasn’t been doing well. They all knew, because it’s always a bit obvious, the way he wears himself out and never lets anyone worry about him.

But this is something else entirely.

“Tubbo,” Techno says, carefully. “I need you to believe me about this.”

“No,” Tubbo says. “Are you kidding? Techno, this is—”

“I think they know where Tommy is,” Techno says. And just like that, there is no breath left in Tubbo’s lungs, and his balance is gone as if the floor has been dropped out from under him.

“*What?*” he breathes.

“They know where Tommy is,” Techno says again. “I’ve seen him. I saw—he was bleeding, from his head and all over his face and on his clothes. And then they found his hoodie and it



had blood on it in the same way. That can't be a coincidence. Why would I make up a hallucination where I saw Tommy covered in blood for no reason?"

Tubbo stares at him. "No. No, no, no that's... Techno, this is too much. That's not possible."

"I know it doesn't make sense." Techno stretches his hands across the table, as if he's pleading with Tubbo. Begging him to listen. "But this is the best lead we have, isn't it? If—if they know where he is, I can figure it out too. I just have to figure out how to listen to them better."

Tubbo feels like he's torn between two sides. He's worried for his brother, for Techno, and part of him wants to call Phil right now and tell him everything Techno's just told him. That's probably the best thing to do. This is so far out of Tubbo's depth, and he doesn't know what to do to fix it.

But Techno's right too. That they have no other lead any stronger than this.

"You realize how impossible this sounds," Tubbo says carefully.

"I do," Techno says. "Trust me. I get it. But I think it's something else."

He turns it over a moment longer. Outside, the rain has begun to let up, more of a light shower than the furious sheets it had been earlier. It's a little less dark.

"I don't know," Tubbo says again. "This is a lot to take in, Techno."

"That's fair," Techno says. "I'm sorry I don't have more answers."

"I need more time to think," Tubbo says. "Maybe we can..."

He doesn't finish that sentence. His phone buzzes in his pocket, and at the same time, he hears Techno's do the same. They both reach for them in the same moment.

There's a message on the screen from Wilbur, in a group chat with the three of them. No Phil.

Tubbo's heart drops to his stomach for the third time this afternoon. Anxiety spikes, under his skin, in his throat, twisting his stomach.

He thinks that if today is capable of getting any worse, it definitely will.

Oh, god.

*(1:56) wilbur: Come home NOW. Something happened. Hurry.*

sapnap mvp

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

There are still tears on Quackity's face. He wants to cry harder at the words, and he wants to believe them, and he wants to tell Sapnap that it doesn't matter because it's not people who hurt Quackity now. It's the thing in his chest that doesn't have a name and doesn't let him love anyone. Sapnap can hold him all he wants, but he can't reach inside of Quackity's ribs and tear this out, or put back in everything that it has eaten away.

*"Things don't get better here,"* Wilbur had told him.

Things don't get better in this town, and they don't get better for Quackity either.

## Chapter Notes

you know every single content warning that i've put for this fic before? they all apply to this chapter, plus a side of blood and violence too. read with care.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On Saturday night, Sapnap sits beside Quackity while the ache in his chest tries to eat him from the inside out.

It's a long night after a long day, and Quackity is *tired*. He wakes up sometime in the middle of the night, wakes himself up or is woken up by something else, he doesn't know; either way, he's awake now, and he can't breathe. The emptiness in his chest has grown raking, angry claws like branches and roots, tearing and digging at him. It's an almost physical pain, sharp and angry beneath his ribs. He sobs his way through it.

And Sapnap sits beside him.

Sapnap is quiet words and a gentle voice, a hand on the couch by his knee and another on Quackity's back rubbing reassuring circles. Sapnap is a safe and steady presence and the scent of the body spray he uses that doesn't quite cover up the lingering smell of fries and grease that seems to stick to him even after a shower.

He's everything familiar and comfortable, and when Quackity can turn enough to grab onto the front of the t-shirt Sapnap is wearing - when Sapnap reaches out to pull him into a hug and holds him even closer - Quackity doesn't know how he's ever going to let go.

"You're okay," Sapnap says quietly. "Nightmare?"

He doesn't remember what he'd been dreaming about, but his breath hitches again all the same. "I think so."

Sapnap squeezes him a little tighter. It feels like safety. It feels like Quackity never wants him to let go. It feels like everything he's not allowed to have, but he clings to so desperately all the same.

"You're safe now," is what Sapnap murmurs in response. "No one's gonna hurt you now."

There are still tears on Quackity's face. He wants to cry harder at the words, and he wants to believe them, and he wants to tell Sapnap that it doesn't matter because it's not *people* who hurt Quackity now. It's the thing in his chest that doesn't have a name and doesn't let him love anyone. Sapnap can hold him all he wants, but he can't reach inside of Quackity's ribs and tear this out, or put back in everything that it has eaten away.

*"Things don't get better here,"* Wilbur had told him.

Things don't get better in this town, and they don't get better for Quackity either.

He wakes up again hours later to an alarm going off and a mattress shifting underneath him. Fuzzily, he remembers Sapnap moving both of them from the couch, a quiet mutter of *"This couch isn't comfy enough for both of us,"* and he remembers being too tired and too desperate for Sapnap's grounding touch to have the thought that *this is a terrible idea*.

He has the thought now instead. This was a terrible idea.

The clawing ache in his chest has calmed itself, back to the dormant emptiness that he's used to. Despite the exhaustion that comes from missing half his sleep to whatever last night was, he's awake enough to realize how bad this is going to be.

He wakes up beside Sapnap with the sun barely up and both of them groggy with sleep. He wakes up and gets to see the squinty, sleepy expression on Sapnap's face and hear the grumble in his throat as he turns off his alarm.

He wakes up and has just enough of a mind to crack the joke, "Now who's shit at waking up?"

Sapnap glares at him, eyes still squinted and sleep-lines creased into his cheek. All the response Quackity gets is a pillow to the face. He can't help it; he laughs, hoarse and low, and it breaks a smile on his face.

He stays there under Sapnap's blanket and with his pillow that smells like his shampoo and McDonalds, and he listens to Sapnap move around the rest of the apartment while getting ready for work. It's far too domestic, and Quackity wonders if this is how Karl feels on the mornings after he sleeps over. If he loves to lie in bed and listen to Sapnap get ready for his shift. If he also gets the urge to convince Sapnap to just call off and go back to bed so they

can sleep in, and thinks it's just comfortable and warm here in the bed and it would be nice for Sapnap to lay beside him again, because he was asleep before and he didn't get to *appreciate* it then.

Fuck. Quackity is *not* allowed to be thinking like this.

This is not his relationship. This is not his to get in between, and he doesn't *want* to. Karl and Sapnap are his closest friends, they're all he has left, and he's not going to fuck it up.

Even if Sapnap is standing in the doorway now with his shirt untucked and his hair wet and a toothbrush in his mouth, and he hasn't shaved in a few days but it looks good on him. Even then.

"Are you still hanging out with Karl today?" Sapnap asks around the toothbrush in his mouth.

"Yeah." Quackity decides to stop looking at him. He pulls the pillow over his head. "He's picking me up sometime before lunch."

"Cool."

He hears footsteps back to the bathroom down the hall, and water running, and then a minute later, Sapnap's back.

"I'm working until five today," Sapnap tells him. "So I'll see you whenever you get back from that."

Quackity sticks his hand out from his burrow of blankets and pillows and gives a thumbs up. "Yep."

Off to the side, he hears a drawer open and close, and he hears the rustling of fabric, and the bed tips a little. When Quackity looks over, finally releasing the pillow clamped over his head, Sapnap is sitting on the other side of the bed, putting on his shoes. His still-damp hair is pulled into his usual loose ponytail now. When Sapnap sits up, he turns and looks back at Quackity, and he moves one hand to prop himself up.

His hand is right beside Quackity's hand. It's like there's static energy coming off of it, and Quackity can't stop thinking about how close he is. They'd been *closer* last night, but it feels different now. Now, there's something fluttery in Quackity's chest, and he feels so dumb about it, but Sapnap is looking at him with an expression he can't figure out, and the fluttering won't stop.

"What?" Quackity asks, voice teasing. "You got a staring problem?"

Sapnap blinks, and his face flushes. "Sorry. I was just gonna ask if you're doing all right after last night."

Oh. "Yeah. I'm fine now."

Sapnap nods, but he doesn't look entirely satisfied with the answer. "Call me if you feel worse, okay? Or if you need me for anything. Or text me about whatever, I'll have my phone

on me to see it. Make sure you eat something too, and--”

“Jesus, okay,” Quackity interrupts. “I got it, I got it. I will take care of myself, you big mother hen.”

“I just worry!” Sappnap protests. He starts to get up, and then - he pats Quackity’s hand, just one quick squeeze and then moving on, but it’s like a pure shot of adrenaline. It takes everything in him to keep his hand still, to not reach out and grab Sappnap’s fingers and hold them there. “I’ll see you later today.”

“Bye, Sappy-nappy,” Quackity says, still teasing, with his heart still beating a little fluttery and a little too fast.

Sappnap rolls his eyes, but Quackity knows him too well. There’s something in his eye that’s far too fond for him to actually be annoyed. “Bye, Duck.”

This time, Quackity’s heart might just stop entirely. “Duck?”

“Like *Quack*- ity,” Sappnap says. “Duck. Little duckie. That’s you.”

That’s just... That’s... What kind of a nickname--

“Go to work, dumbass,” Quackity finally splutters out. Sappnap does with a final wave, and he leaves Quackity to suffer in peace.

He puts the pillow back over his face. When he hears the front door close, he screams into it.

God *fucking* dammit.

Karl picks him up just about noon, and already, the clouds outside have grown dark and heavy. Quackity squints up at them for a moment before getting into the passenger side of Karl’s little faded blue car.

“Hi,” Karl says brightly. “How’s your morning been?”

Quackity’s stomach curls with the tiniest bit of guilt as he thinks about how exactly the morning had gone. *Spent it imagining I was you and had your boyfriend*, he thinks, which is not something he wants to admit to anyone. “Good so far. How about you?”

“Also good.” Karl shifts the car into gear and pulls onto the street. “You okay if we go for a little bit of a drive? I wanna show you something.”

Quackity raises an eyebrow. “Show me something? What is it?”

“It’s a secret,” Karl says, his voice affecting a solemn tone. Quackity smiles at it. “You’ll see when we get there.”

“Fair enough.” Quackity looks across the car at Karl. He’s a bit disheveled today, but he makes it look cute. Messy hair sticks up in a few places, his patterned shirt is made up of bright colors that don’t quite match the blue of his trousers, and there’s a hint of dark lines under his eyes. “You doing okay, Karlos? You look tired today.”

“Hm?” Karl glances over for a brief second before redirecting his attention to the road once again. “Oh, yeah. I’m okay. Didn’t sleep super well last night, but.” He shrugs with a half-smile, something that looks like it’s meant to reassure despite the words leaving his mouth. “You know how it is. Nothing too serious, just couldn’t stay asleep.”

Quackity does indeed know how it is. “We could go back to Sapnap’s and nap after you show me your top secret surprise.”

Karl’s half-smile widens into a grin. “We sure could.”

At that moment, the car jolts slightly, hitting a pothole in the road or something, and it shakes Quackity’s attention from where it’s still focused right in on Karl’s face. He glances out the windshield again. As he realizes what road they’ve turned on to, a jolt of anxiety coils up in his stomach.

They’re nearing the edge of town, where the road starts to turn to gravel path and take them out through the trees into land owned by no one in particular.

“The woods?” he questions, glancing again at Karl. Trying to keep his voice light, he tries for a joke. “You know things didn’t go super great for us last time we were out here.”

“I know,” Karl says. “That’s why we’ve gotta go again and have a nice time this go around.”

*Or , Quackity thinks, we could just stay out of the woods entirely.* “You sure?”

“Why not?” The road turns to gravel. The car slows, but it doesn’t stop. “Do you not want to be out here?”

It would be so easy to say yes, and Quackity really wants to. To tell Karl to turn the car around, find something else to do, call this expedition off and just go back to Sapnap’s and hang out there. Karl would listen to him. Karl would get it.

But Karl wants to show him something out here. He seems excited. Quackity can handle the anxiety in his stomach for a little while.

“I’m fine,” Quackity says. “Nothing can hurt me out here as long as I’ve got you with me, right?”

Karl smiles. He reaches a hand across the center console of the car, and when Quackity takes it, he gives a squeeze.

“You’ll be okay,” Karl says, reassuring.

He’s got Karl. He’ll be okay.

Karl parks the car on the side of one of the gravel paths outside of town. They're fairly deep into the woods, and in the direction Karl sets off in, there's hardly even a trail to walk on.

Quackity tries not to lag behind. Anxiety ties into knots in his stomach. The emptiness in his chest aches loudly.

"It's gonna rain soon," Karl says. He holds his hand out to Quackity again. Even the flutter in his chest at the movement feels heavier than it should. He takes Karl's hand anyway, and as their fingers lace together, Quackity has the unmistakable feeling that this is a *bad idea*.

Two in one day, he thinks. First Sapnap this morning, and now holding Karl's hand and walking through the woods with him.

The wind picks up as they walk, sharp currents of cold air filtering between trees and cutting right through Quackity's jacket. He shivers. Leaves and sticks crunch beneath their shoes. The trees grow closely and randomly, unbothered by human interference. There's not even a trail here, all brush and fallen leaves.

Karl leads him by the hand deeper into the trees. The anxiety in his stomach twists tighter and tighter.

It's cold. The sky above them darkens by the second. It's gonna fucking pour, and *holy shit* he does not want to be out in the woods in the rain.

He doesn't like this. He doesn't want to be out here. Even with Karl, he can't handle this.

It's too soon and it's too much and he feels like the memories he keeps locked away are going to start strangling him.

"Karl," Quackity says. His throat feels tight. "Karl, I think I want to go back."

He expects Karl to stop immediately. It's what he *should* do; immediately turning with brown eyes wide and soft with concern, leading them back to the car without a moment of hesitation.

That's the Karl that Quackity knows.

Karl's pace doesn't slow. "We're almost there."

"We can come back another day," Quackity says. He tugs at his hand, but Karl's grip tightens.

"Trust me, Quackity, you'll be happy when we get there," Karl says. His voice is as cheery as ever. "You won't ever want to go back."

"What?" Something cold runs through him, and a nervous laugh slips from his mouth. "What the fuck? Karl, let's go back. Please."



Karl doesn't answer. His grip on Quackity's hand is vice-like now, fingers digging into his knuckles hard enough to bruise.

Quackity's heart pounds in his empty chest. He can hear it rushing in his ears and feel it suffocating in his throat. "Karl. Let go of my hand."

He doesn't. Karl doesn't let go, so Quackity digs his heels into the ground and pulls back. The sudden movement catches Karl off guard and he wobbles for a moment, but regains his balance quickly and turns to face Quackity.

"What's wrong?" Karl asks. He looks normal. He looks like nothing is wrong, and he won't let go of his hand.

"You're freaking me out," Quackity says. His voice comes out shaky and breathless. "Please let go."

"I don't mean to scare you," Karl says. He's not letting go. Quackity pulls again at his hand, and Karl's grip tightens painfully. "You'll be okay. I mean it, you're gonna like this."

"I already don't like it." Quackity's words tumble out, rushed and on the verge of hysterics. "Karl, c'mon, you know I don't like it out here, *please*. I wanna go back. Please."

"You don't really," Karl says, as conversational as if he and Quackity were discussing the weather. "I know you don't. You're tired. You've been running for a long time and you're ready to be done. Aren't you?"

Quackity can only stare at him. "What the hell is this? What are you *saying*?"

"They've been waiting a long time," Karl says simply. "So have you."

*So have you.*

His heart beats in his ears, so loudly that it's all he can hear. Even the rustling of leaves and the rush of the wind goes quiet, and all Quackity can hear is his breathing and his heart and all he can see is Karl standing in front of him with that look on his face, knowing and normal and like nothing at all is wrong.

There's an emptiness weighing at him, something in his chest and his hands that so badly wants to drag him down. Karl's hands, crushingly tight around his fingers, feel like the same thing.

This is the dangerous thing; that he *could* give in. That Karl isn't wrong. That Karl is speaking words that have lived inside of him for years. Somehow, Karl is reaching into his chest and speaking aloud the thing that has been wordlessly whispering there for so long that Quackity's learned to understand it anyway. The pull of *aren't you tired, aren't you ready to let go? You don't have to keep going anymore.*

But it's the familiarity of the thing that saves him.

It's the trees around him, looming and hungry and dark with secrets Quackity left between them. It's the bruised knuckles and pain sparking bright in them. It's how quickly this day fell apart and now he can't comprehend what's happening but knows, *immediately, instinctively knows*, that he needs to run.

It's terror in his chest that keeps him grounded, somehow. His breath comes out in bursts and fear floods him, and the panic is enough for him to keep his mind from following the emptiness in his chest, from falling down depths that he doesn't know he can pull himself back out of.

"No," Quackity says, frantic, nearly a sob. "No, Karl, no. Let go. I don't—I don't understand, let *go*."

And he *pulls*.

He pulls his hand, as hard as he can, dragging Karl back with him. He throws himself off balance, and he takes Karl down with him.

Or at least, he tries.

Quackity stumbles, his foot hitting a root, and he trips backward. Karl is still holding on, and now he reaches a second hand, grabbing both of Quackity's wrists. His foot hits a slippery patch of leaves. Karl yanks on both of Quackity's hands, and—

Things happen too quickly for him to keep up with.

He knows he falls. He knows the way Karl drags him forward sends him sideways instead, off balance and unable to catch himself.

He hits something, he falls, he can't breathe, he's sobbing and he's scared and he—

*He's seventeen years old in these woods, and he's sobbing and he's scared and there's a gun pressed to the back of his head.*

*"You just had to ruin everything," his father is saying. "You couldn't just stay home..."*

*"Please." Repeating between the tears that run hot on his face like it's the only word he knows, the one prayer he wants to be heard. "Please, please."*

—He's on his back and there's blood running hot down his face. Everything hurts and aches and he's so *tired*, but he can't stop. He hasn't stopped. He's moving, his arm is stretched above him, Karl...

*"Karl!"*

Karl drags him by one arm, and the pain in his shoulder hurts like nothing else. He rolls to the side, trying to stumble back to his feet, and the shifting of his weight is cumbersome enough to force Karl to stop.

The forest sways around him. His head aches. His chest begs him to lie down and give up.

“Come on,” Karl says. Quackity wants to curl up and sob. This isn’t Karl. This isn’t fair. “Make this easier on both of us, okay?”

*“Let’s do this the easy way,” his father is saying. His father is pointing a gun at his head. His father is going to kill him. “You both walk where I tell you, or I fucking blow his head off and you get to carry what’s left of him. Your choice.”*

*This is the moment Quackity realizes he’s going to die. There is no way out of this. He’s been careful, he’s been brave, he’s survived this long and it never even fucking mattered, because this was always how it was going to end. Now this is it.*

*He’s either going to die here or he’s going to die in a few minutes or in a few hours. Nothing he did ever mattered.*

He’s going to die here.

He was always going to die here.

His mother is buried in this forest. Her grave in the cemetery is an empty one, because they never found her body. His father told them they wouldn’t, that she was gone and never coming back and they’d never find her, and he was right. They didn’t.

They never find anyone in these woods.

*Quackity is on his knees and in tears and blood pools dark and thick over leaves and roots. He feels sick, sicker than he ever has, and someone is talking but he can’t hear, can’t focus—*

Karl is talking. Quackity is on his knees in these woods and he can’t hear, can’t focus.

Karl doesn’t have a weapon, but he’s taller, he’s stronger, and he’s faster. Quackity has blood running down the side of his face and now he gets shaky feet underneath him. The trees are wavering and the wind is cold and the first drops of rain hit him squarely in the forehead.

“Please,” Quackity whispers. “Please.”

His mother is buried in these woods. Her bones are here, and his will be buried here too, an unmarked shared grave of his and his mother’s and everyone who has ever been taken into these trees and never allowed to leave. He’ll join the ranks of the lost and the alone, and roots will grow between his ribs and leaves will take the place of his lungs, and he will never be found.

The ache in his chest has never screamed quite so loud.

When he is seventeen, he doesn’t know that no one will find him. He knows he’s going to die, but he doesn’t stop to think for the moments after that. His mind is consumed with the terror of the now, and there is no room left for the uncertainty of the after.

It's not him who gets them out of this. He is not the reason they are still alive years later, or as live as they can be, a fate delayed for now.

It's Wilbur, with hands raised and slow movements, who gets his father to take a step back.

"We'll walk," Wilbur says. "Don't shoot."

And it works. The pressure of cold metal moves from his head.

Quackity gets to his feet, slowly, shakily. He is not dead, not dying in this moment, but it's hanging over him all the same. He's been bought time, a few minutes, a few hours, a few years - but in this moment, he feels the first of the weight that will haunt him for the rest of his life. That he was meant to die here, alone and afraid, and no matter how far he runs, that truth will forever be inescapable.

Karl holds his hand out between them, as gentle as could be. Quackity's fingers are bruised and sore.

"You'll be okay," Karl says, quietly, softly, and *oh*, it aches in Quackity's chest. "You've hurt long enough."

He doesn't know what to do. He heaves a sob, caught here between the ache in his chest and the pull of the trees, between the fear coursing through his veins and the tired emptiness he's carried for so long, between the memories in his head and Karl's outstretched hands.

There's no one here to make a decision for him this time. This time, he really will die here alone.

Because he is not the one who made the decision to live, years ago. He's not the one who decided they'd walk out of those woods. He's not the one who bought them any time.

It's Wilbur who hides his phone in one hand, and Quackity can just see the flash of a screen with an ongoing call. He doesn't know how he possibly had the chance to dial without being caught.

It's Wilbur who stands between Quackity and his father when they hear the sirens, faint and wailing in the distance. It's Wilbur, shoulders squared and a challenge flashing in his eyes, who stares down the barrel of a gun as if it's nothing.

They are both going to die here.

It's Wilbur who is going to die first, with a yellow sweater about to be stained a deep crimson instead and a twin left behind to be the only half of an incomplete set. Standing in front of Quackity as if the extra seconds are going to do either of them any good.

He has the thought that it's selfish of Wilbur to protect him like this. That Wilbur doesn't want to be the one to watch the other die, as if Quackity would be better off for it. It's not fair.

So Quackity moves.

He sees the way his father's attention switches at the sudden motion. He sees the gun swing, sees it point at him, and sees a flash too.

He waits. He expects it to hurt, or maybe kill him instantly and never hurt at all.

It doesn't do either of these.

Instead, the bullet misses.

There's a branch in Wilbur's hand in the precious seconds they have to react. He swings it, more haphazard than aimed, and his father's mistake is raising his hands to defend himself from it.

Wilbur does not miss.

The gun is on the ground.

And it's Wilbur who gets to it first.

When he was seventeen, Quackity was hopelessly in love with Karl Jacobs. When he was seventeen, he was sure he was going to die in these woods, and no one would so much as miss him.

He is not seventeen anymore.

This is the only thing that has changed.

"You're going to be okay," Karl tells him, so gentle and so fond. A sob tears itself from Quackity's throat. "Come with me."

Karl stands in front of him, his hand outstretched, and rain runs down his face. The patterned shirt he wears sticks to his skin under his familiar colorblock windbreaker.

He is smiling.

Quackity's memory of this moment is spotty. Something in him keeps the memory jumbled and broken, caught in half-details and pieces that he's left trying to fit together for years after.

Something shatters in him, in his mind, and in his chest. Something breaks and it starts to empty him.

He remembers the last thing his father said. He remembers the way he'd said it - eyes wide, panicked.

"Wait," he'd said. "Wait—"

And he remembers the sound, the crack of a second gunshot. He'd flinched at that one too.

Blood pools thick and dark across leaves and roots. He feels sick, so sick.

Blood seeps from under his father's head, from the place where his mouth would've been. From the gaping, shattered hole torn into it.

Quackity remembers Wilbur's hands on his shoulders. He remembers Wilbur isn't holding the gun anymore.

"He shot himself," Wilbur is saying. He repeats it. "That's what we're going to say, okay? He heard the sirens, panicked, and shot himself."

"He shot himself," Quackity remembers echoing back, his tongue clumsy and numb in his mouth.

"This isn't our fault," Wilbur says. "He did this."

He repeats it until it's all he can say, and it runs in his head, *he did this, he shot himself, he did*, and he babbles it out to anyone who listens. There's a blanket over his shoulders, there are sirens and lights, there's a paramedic asking him if he's hurt, there's - oh, it's Phil, it's Phil asking him if he's all right, and Quackity can't focus.

"...was going to kill us," Wilbur is saying. He's calmer than Quackity. Phil's face is pale. He's in uniform. He was the one responding to the call.

"Tubbo," Quackity remembers asking. He doesn't remember if he gets out any other words besides the name.

"At my house," Phil had said. "He's safe."

And that's all that matters, isn't it? They're alive. Quackity thinks he shouldn't be, and he doesn't know yet that the feeling is never going to go away, but he's alive. He's alive.

He's been running from it for so long. He's tired, but he's alive.

Quackity is not going to die here. Not even for Karl Jacobs.

He takes a step forward, and Karl smiles wider, and Quackity feels a pang of - of so much in his chest. Hurt, guilt, fear, longing, worry, *sadness*. All of it tangles up in his chest and he feels far too full to let that empty feeling drag him down.

“I’m really sorry, Karl,” Quackity says between the tears and rain falling down his face. Karl’s eyebrows start to furrow in question, but before he can ask it, Quackity punches him directly in the nose.

It stings his already-bruised knuckles, and something cracks under his fist. It isn’t from his hand. Karl lets out a strangled cry, staggering back. He stumbles and falls.

Quackity turns and runs.

He has no idea how much time that bought him. His legs are still shaky and his head pounds and the world wavers around him. Rain pours down in a cold fury, turning the forest floor slippery with mud and wet leaves.

Quackity runs all the same.

He has to stay away from the roads, even though the gravel would be easier to run on. Karl might circle back to his car and catch up so much faster that way.

That’s the only coherent thought he has. He’s still sobbing and panic still screams in his head, in his veins. Something is so, so very wrong.

He was right. He was right, oh, *god*, he was right. There is something wrong with these woods. There is something wrong with this town. It brings out the worst in everyone, and it’s only a matter of time before it takes someone else.

They’re cursed. They’re all cursed, it’s not just him, it’s *everyone*. He wants to laugh. He does, and it mixes with a sob and tears out of his chest in one loud pained cry. They’re all fucking cursed. It’s not just him.

He runs, he runs, he runs. He runs as his tears and blood mix with rain and soak all of him, his beanie, his hair, the hoodie he never did give back to Sapnap. He runs and his breath aches in his chest and grates in his ears; he runs even while his legs begin to cramp and his stomach aches; he runs, he runs, he runs.

*“Nothing ever gets better here,”* Wilbur had said. *“Deep down, nothing changes.”*

And of course he would be right.

He wonders if Wilbur’s carried it around too. Knowing they should’ve died there, that something is wrong with them both now because they didn’t. That they’re two corpses walking and it’s a matter of time before it catches up, not a matter of if it ever will. He wonders if Wilbur knows that in the end, it will drag them back in, and they’ll never, ever be free.

Quackity runs until he's out of the woods. He runs, and the rain has begun to let up, and Quackity feels as though his chest is going to collapse. His breath wheezes in and out of him, his throat aches with the effort of it. His head spins and spins.

He runs. He runs even when he can't anymore, no more than a halfway attempt to jog. He doesn't know where to go, but he doesn't stop. He can't go back to Sapnap's. He doesn't have anywhere to go anymore.

There's no thought process behind this. He just moves.

He's standing on a familiar porch, in front of a house he promised himself he wouldn't visit again. This family is not for him. This home is not his to intrude upon.

He rings the doorbell anyway.

It's Wilbur who opens the door. His eyes change rapidly, from surprised to confused to wide-eyed fear. "Quackity? Holy shit, are you okay? What happened?"

"Time is a circle." It bubbles out of him, a laugh, a sob, desperate and hysterical.

Wilbur stares. "What?"

Three years ago, his father murdered his mother in those woods, and they never found her. Wilbur shot him dead, and they both lied and said he'd done it to himself, and they never told anyone. They're both cursed.

And now Karl tried to kill him.

The thought of it - blunt and real and settling into his head - startles another laugh, another sob, out of his mouth. Karl tried to kill him. *Karl tried to kill him in the woods and no one would have found him.*

Time is a circle.

"You were right," Quackity says. "You were right. Time is a fucking circle. It's always going to catch up with us."

## Chapter End Notes

so. yeah. uh. how are you guys



# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

hello my dear readers!! i hope you are all well and have had a good week. everyone who began/is beginning school, i wish you all the best of luck!! take care of yourselves and remember to be taking breaks <3

applicable warnings in this chapter are the implied/referenced child abuse tag, and a fun new warning called many typos because i no longer have a beta on this fic. we're just winging it now folks! if anything seems rougher than usual: my bad lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo rushes into the kitchen with tinges of panic still rushing in his ears and in his chest, and he tries to comprehend the scene in front of him.

There were a lot of things he was expecting - fearing, dreading - to see when he walked through their front door. A hundred different anxiety-fueled scenarios had run through his head the whole way here, prickling under his skin and dread curled sick in his stomach.

Now, his heart drops to his stomach at the sight ahead of him.

Quackity's sitting on a chair at the table with his knees curled up against his chest, and the thing that Tubbo hones in on in an instant, after the shock of seeing *Quackity* of all people here, is the stains of crimson on the piece of cloth Wilbur is holding to his head.

It's heavy in his stomach, pounding in his head, ugly memories scratching at his skin and leaving a sick taste on his tongue. There's something about the look on Quackity's face, a little vacant, a little scared, masked almost entirely by something tiredly guarded. Tubbo knows that look. Tubbo's seen it too many times to not recognize it immediately, even if it's been years, even if it had been Tubbo bandaging cuts and bruises before, not Wilbur, even if those memories were supposed to live somewhere deep down where Tubbo doesn't have to see them.

"What the fuck happened?" The words burst out of him, sharp and a little shakier than Tubbo wishes. He pushes past Techno and moves to the other side of the table. Quackity glances at him as he does, his eyes still glassy and a bit distant.

"We're figuring that out," Wilbur says. He sets down the cloth he's holding and exchanges it for gauze and tape. As he moves, Tubbo catches a glimpse of a gash running from Quackity's hairline down nearly to his eyebrow. It doesn't look like it's bleeding, at least not anymore.

Fuck. Fuck, *fuck*, seeing his—seeing *Quackity* hurt still stings.

“I’m okay,” Quackity says, but his voice is quiet and hoarse like he doesn’t mean it. “Not dying.”

“Who hurt you?” Tubbo asks flatly. His hands are in fists, even though his voice is carefully steady.

Quackity winces, either at Tubbo’s question or at Wilbur’s touch, bandaging the cut on his head. “Karl.”

“*What?*” Techno and Tubbo speak the word in unison, and Techno continues. “*Karl?* Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t joke about that.” Quackity looks up to meet Techno’s gaze with a tired look in his eyes. Wilbur applies a final piece of tape to the strip of gauze on Quackity’s forehead, and then takes a step back to the table to clean up.

Tubbo’s head spins.

“Okay,” Techno says, slowly, rationally. “Do we… Are you safe, Q? Do we need to call the police?”

“I don’t know.” Quackity slumps forward to put his arms down on the table. “No. Not the police. I don’t… Something’s wrong with Karl. He’s not himself.”

Wilbur frowns. “You said that earlier too. What do you mean? I don’t understand why he would ever try to… why he would hurt you.”

“You’re asking the wrong person for an explanation.” A laugh slips out of his mouth, shaky with tears and bordering on hysterical. Quackity scrubs a hand over his face, and Tubbo’s skin itches. He doesn’t know what he wants to do, grab on to Quackity maybe, sit beside him and lean against him the way he used to when they were years younger and would lock themselves in one room for as long as they could.

It was always better when both of them were together. Even if it was Quackity with a new bruise or something bleeding, because Tubbo could fix it, could patch it up and sit beside him and Quackity gave him smiles that didn’t fool Tubbo even back then, and they knew they’d be okay after that. It was better when they were beside each other, and it wasn’t Quackity pushing Tubbo into the room alone and then staying outside of it himself so all Tubbo could do was keep himself quiet with a hand over his mouth and *listen*—

“Someone needs to say what’s going on,” Techno says, finally speaking up again. Tubbo realizes he’s out of breath, breathes in quietly and shakily. Quackity is still beside him.

“Karl asked me to spend the afternoon with him,” Quackity says, his voice quiet but steeled into calm. “We’d been planning it since Thursday, and he picked me up and said he had something to show me. And he drove us out to the woods and I was--I mean, I was a little nervous, but it’s the woods, I just figured… So I just followed him, and we walked for awhile before I got too freaked out being out there and told him I wanted to go back.”

Techno nods. “And then?”

A shaky breath in and out. “And then he wouldn’t let me go back. I thought he was just being weird, I don’t know, but he was—he’d grabbed my hand and wouldn’t let it go—” Quackity raises his hand, and Tubbo’s stomach lurches once again at the bruised fingerprints dug into it — “And then I freaked out. He started saying really weird shit, I panicked and lost my balance, and hit my head or something, I don’t super remember it.”

Tubbo frowns. “Did you get a concussion? That’s what that sounds like, Q.”

“I don’t think so,” Wilbur says. Quackity nods in agreement.

“I was panicking,” Quackity says, and he stumbles over his words for the next bit. “Like... The, the kind of—couldn’t remember where I was, getting stuck in memories, that kind of panicking. I think the remembering issue is just from that.”

The curl of worry inside of him doesn’t go away. Tubbo folds his arms around himself instead.

“You said he was saying weird shit,” Techno says. “Like what?”

Quackity leans his head on his arms again, his eyes darkening as he frowns. “*Really* weird shit. Like...” He looks between Wilbur and Techno and Tubbo, like he’s debating on something, and then he just blurts it out. “You know how I think I’m cursed?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo says. Wilbur nods. Techno’s the only one who looks confused, but he doesn’t say anything.

“He was saying exactly that kind of stuff,” Quackity says. “Except it was so specifically the things I feel, and haven’t told anyone, that it just felt... It felt like he *knew* what I’d been feeling without me ever saying it aloud.”

Holy fuck. Okay, everyone is absolutely losing it - first Techno, now this? “Like *what* , Q?”

Quackity studies his hands, bruised knuckles and chipped nail polish. His voice comes out quiet. “He said I’d been running long enough. Like it was time to just give up and rest, and Karl told me they’d been waiting for me and wanted to help.”

Tubbo’s blood runs cold.

“They,” Techno echoes. He sounds strained, but Tubbo can’t tell if he’s imagining it, if he’s putting the tone in his voice. “What did he mean by ‘they’?”

“I don’t know,” Quackity admits. “But he definitely was referring to someone. Or something. I think... I don’t know. I think it was whatever he was trying to bring me to.”

Tubbo meets Techno’s eyes. They’ve made the same connection, he’s sure of it, but Techno shakes his head almost imperceptibly. *One problem at a time*, Techno’s gaze seems to say.

Fine. Tubbo will give him this for the night, because Quackity is freaking him the fuck out, and he needs to focus on one thing at a time. Compartmentalize and take it one at a time. One older brother who is slowly losing it at a time.

They're all quiet for a minute longer, and this time, it's Wilbur who breaks that silence.

"Do you think," he says carefully, "do you think this has anything to do with Tommy?"

Quackity looks at him. "You think Karl could've dragged Tommy out to the woods? Wil, he's *Karl*. Tommy's definitely taller and more than capable of getting away from him."

"I didn't mean that it was Karl," Wilbur says. "I mean, if there's something out there that wants... whatever it wants, maybe that's where Tommy is."

Tubbo's chest is tight and his breath feels loud. He clenches his hands into fists, tight enough to feel his fingernails dig into his palms, enough to ground himself and focus.

"We are definitely missing pieces here," Tubbo says. "Something's not adding up."

"Then let's go find the pieces," Techno says.

All three of them turn to stare at him.

"What?" Techno just looks back. "Maybe Karl's still out there. All four of us go find him, demand to know what the fuck he was talking about and take us to whatever the hell 'they' are, and we find those missing pieces. There's four of us and one Karl. We'd be fine."

"We have no idea what he was trying to do, though," Wilbur says. "Not to say that we shouldn't go out there. We just have no idea what we're walking into."

"Techno's right, though," Tubbo interjects. "This could connect to Tommy. If we want to find out what's going on, we're gonna have to go looking."

Techno nods. Wilbur looks between them, and then at Quackity, like he's asking an unspoken question. Quackity shrugs. An unspoken answer.

"All right," Wilbur says. "Let's get going, then. Everyone get jackets, it's still raining out there."

When they pile into Wilbur's car, Techno's carrying something in one hand. Wilbur raises an eyebrow at him.

"A knife? Really?"

"You wanna go out there unarmed?" Techno asks, unfazed.

"Karl doesn't have a weapon," Quackity says. "*He's* unarmed."

“We’re not gonna stab Karl,” Wilbur says.

Techno tucks the knife away. “I know. It’s just in case.”

Wilbur parks their car beside the small blue one pulled to the side of the gravel trail. It’s almost dark out even if the sun hasn’t fully set yet, dim from the clouds that still obscure the sky and bare branches of trees that obscure even more of it. At least the rain has lightened up, nothing more than an occasional drip now.

“Looks like you were right,” Wilbur comments to Techno as they pile out of the car. “He hasn’t come back yet.”

Quackity looks pale and a little like he might be sick. He sticks close to the side of whoever’s closest to him. At this moment, that’s Tubbo.

“Which way?” Wilbur asks, and Quackity points through the trees wordlessly.

“Stick close together,” Techno says. “Nobody goes anywhere alone. Got it?”

None of them would go anywhere alone, Tubbo wants to say. They’re not stupid. He gives him a thumbs up instead, though.

Wilbur and Techno forge ahead, armed with a flashlight and Techno’s knife. Quackity hangs a few steps back, walking in pace with Tubbo and hands shoved deep into the pockets of the jacket he’s borrowed from Wilbur.

They’re both quiet. Sticks crack under their feet, under the feet of the twins ahead of them, off to the sides in unsettling bursts of noise. It’s always an animal, or branches settling, newly heavy with rain. Never anything else. Quackity startles at the sound every time.

It’s been years since he’s spent this much time with Quackity. It’s been years since he’s so much as spoken a full conversation with him.

He wonders how much the two of them have changed in that time.

Q’s hair is longer, but he looks as tired as he always had. Tubbo is taller, he thinks. Quackity seems smaller than he once did, back when Tubbo looked up to him - literally, metaphorically. When Quackity seemed so much older than him, so much wiser, so much braver. Now, he and Tubbo are at eye level. They’re the same.

It’s a funny feeling in his stomach, to realize that Tubbo’s as old now as Quackity was back then. That everything that happened to them, everything they went through—Q was *younger* then than Tubbo is now. It hits him like a punch to the gut, a sort of sick ache.

They were so young back then.

“Why did you come back?” Tubbo asks, abruptly, quietly enough that the twins won’t hear the question. Quackity’s eyes flash in his direction.

It isn't exactly the question he wants to ask. What he wants to know, the question that begs for an answer in his head, that's sat ugly and unanswered in his chest for years, is *Why did you ever leave?*

He thinks he knows the answer now, or he's at least given himself one to hold on to, when there's nothing else left for him to hold. But that answer doesn't work with everything Quackity has done since. What confuses him is not what happened, but what happens next.

"It's not easy to explain," Q says. "There isn't a reason that makes sense. I just... I just did."

Tubbo kicks a rock ahead of him. It hits a root and stops there.

"I meant to stay away forever." It sounds like an apology. It's a quiet, sad laugh. "I didn't mean to... to come back and remind everyone I still exist. Digging up old wounds for everyone."

He isn't wrong, but Tubbo hates the way he says it. "It isn't your fault people got hurt. It's not—it's definitely not your fault for *existing*."

Quackity shrugs. "Doesn't matter. I still remind you of it anyway."

Tubbo stops, and he stays still until Quackity stops and looks at him too. There's something empty, something sad about the way this person he once called his brother looks at him.

"You know I missed you," Tubbo blurts out. "I missed you every day. I wished you'd called."

Quackity winces. "I'm really sorry."

"I don't want an apology," Tubbo says. Maybe it's true. "When you left, did you do it for yourself?"

"I..." He looks like he doesn't know what to say. "I don't know. I think so. It was selfish. I couldn't stay and look at anyone. Couldn't look at you."

"Why?"

"Fuck, Tubbo, I don't know." He presses his hands over his face, heels of his hands over his eyes. "Something in me broke, just took everything right out of my chest until there was nothing left, and I don't know how else to explain it."

"Is this about your curse thing?" Tubbo asks.

"Yes," Quackity says. "Maybe. I don't know. My whole life, or the most of it that I remember, I've been taking care of you. You had Tommy, and Phil, and—and a better family, better than me, and I... I didn't want to fuck it up for you."

Tubbo's arms wrap around himself. "So you didn't leave for yourself, you left for me."

"No," Quackity says. "I mean, sort of, but... Fuck, Tubbo, I can't explain this shit. I left because I was supposed to die here and I couldn't stand to be here anymore, and I thought if I

left... maybe then it would go away. The feeling like I wasn't supposed to be alive anymore."

"Did it?"

Quackity laughs, tired, dry. "No. I ended up back here again and again because it doesn't go away. And now..." He gestures to the woods around them. "This all just proves it right, you know? It's gonna catch up someday. I'm getting fucking tired of running from it."

Tubbo feels like there's itching under his skin and he feels like he might cry. "You know that's fucking stupid? You're fucking stupid. You—you're not supposed to be dead because our fucked up piece of shit dad tried to bring you out here to die."

Quackity just shrugs. "And then Karl did the same thing."

"Then Karl's a fucked up piece of shit too," Tubbo says, with more venom than he intends. "You're *not* supposed to be dead."

Quackity shrugs again. "It doesn't matter," he says. "I'm not dead, but I will be someday. Maybe soon, maybe not, I dunno, but it *is* gonna catch up eventually."

"You're fucking morbid," Tubbo says, and Quackity gives him a faint smile.

"Quackity!"

Both of them turn to see Wilbur a few paces ahead, beckoning in their direction. Quackity turns and starts in his direction, Tubbo following behind.

"Is this the place?" Wilbur asks. He points at the trunk of a tree, slightly sheltered by branches, where there's a faint smear of red.

Quackity's hand reaches up to touch the side of his beanie, where it covers the bandages around the side of his head. "I think so."

Techno's studying the ground in the area, and now he points to a few muddy smears in the leaves. "This direction?"

"Yeah." Quackity's gone pale again. He doesn't say anything else.

"And you said he was unarmed, didn't you?" Techno asks.

"Yeah," Quackity says. "As far as I could tell."

Techno makes a humming grunt in his throat. He's studying the trunk of a tree ahead of them, running his finger over... Over something. "Weird. Cuz this looks pretty recent."

Tubbo crowds in closer to see. There's some kind of notch cut into the bark, sharp and even, one straight slashing cut. Techno takes out his knife, lines the edge of it up with the cut in the tree. The blade of the knife is too thin to match up.

"Maybe an animal made it," Tubbo suggests. "Bear scratch or something."

“There’s only one, though. Can’t be claws.” Techno runs his finger over it again, making a line, and then points in the direction made by the cut. “Angled downwards, over there.”

Tubbo isn’t sure what he’s getting at. He watches as Techno moves, kneeling in the leaves in the direction he’d pointed. Nobody speaks until he gets to his feet again, something small and metallic held between his fingers.

And then Tubbo’s breath stops in his throat.

It’s a bullet, darkened and used but still shiny enough to have been recent.

“Oh, fuck,” Wilbur breathes.

“Casing would be somewhere over where you’re standing,” Techno says, pointing back towards Wilbur. Immediately, he starts looking through the leaves at his feet.

“And it couldn’t have been someone out deer hunting, or... or something?” Tubbo asks, just to be sure.

“It’s a bullet from a small gun,” Wilbur says. “Not something a hunter would use.”

Behind Tubbo, he hears Quackity suck in a shaky breath.

“Karl didn’t have a gun,” Quackity says, his voice wavering. “I don’t even know where he’d get one. He... that wasn’t him.”

“Yeah, well.” Wilbur sits back on his heels and holds up a second piece of metal. Casing. “Somebody who was out here has one. And they were shooting at *something*.”

Fuck.

“Fuck.” Tubbo repeats the word aloud too.

“Should we even be out here?” Quackity sounds increasingly nervous. “If someone’s out here with a *gun*...”

He’s got a point. Tubbo checks his phone - no service this far out from town. If something happens, they’re on their own. It’s steadily getting darker, and they’re at least a fifteen minute walk from where they left the car.

“If you want to go back, you can,” Techno says. “I’m gonna stay out and keep looking.”

Techno’s fucking insane. Tubbo stares at him. Techno just meets his gaze with an unbothered look.

“I’ll stay with Techno,” he says finally. Techno left him behind to search these woods alone once before. It’s not gonna happen again.

“Do you want me to take you home?” Wilbur asks, turning back to Quackity.



“No,” Q says, a bit reluctantly. “Karl—There was something clearly wrong with him. Whoever’s out here... He could be in danger. I’ll stay and help look.”

So they keep looking.

They keep exploring, further into the woods, as the sun sets behind grey clouds and the sky grows darker and darker. The rain stays its steady trickle, never pouring any harder but still enough to leave them all soaked and cold within an hour. They keep searching anyway.

There’s no sign of Karl anywhere.

Any tracks they could’ve found would be obscured by the rain, so they’re really just setting out at random and hoping for the best. Wilbur and Techno turn on flashlights, and Tubbo and Quackity stick close behind them.

Nobody really speaks. Nobody knows what to say.

It’s cold, it’s dark, it’s starting to feel a little hopeless and a little like no matter what he does, there’s always going to be a dead end for Tubbo to run face first into. He has so many pieces and none of them make any sense and he’s frustrated enough to scream into the rain.

“We’re gonna have to go back soon,” Wilbur murmurs, quietly enough that Tubbo’s not sure anyone but Techno was intended to hear. “Dad’s gonna flip his shit if he’s noticed we’re all gone.”

Oh. Right. None of them left a note or so much as a text. And without any service out here, there’s no way to know if he’s been trying to get ahold of them.

Tubbo feels a little bad.

It’s as they’re walking that Techno suddenly freezes in place and throws his arm out to the side, and Tubbo runs right into it, stumbling to a stop as Quackity does the same behind him.

“Wh—” Tubbo starts to say, but Techno’s outstretched arm turns into a hand over Tubbo’s mouth instead, and Tubbo catches the hint immediately.

He strains his eyes through the rain to see what Techno had caught before the rest of them. He can’t make anything out, but Techno’s eyes are focused intently ahead of them. He’s listening, so caught up that Tubbo can nearly feel the way he’s holding his breath. It makes Tubbo’s stop in his throat too.

He still can’t see anything. Nobody moves. He has the brief thought that whatever Techno had noticed might not have been real, and he’s wondering how he should ask if it’s the hallucinations again, when he hears it too.

A snap of a twig, and then a flash of something reflecting light through the trees.

Almost instantly and in unison, Techno and Wilbur switch their flashlights off. Nobody breathes. All four of them are frozen, Techno’s arm still stretched protectively in front of Tubbo.

Rain drops down his hair, down his neck. He shivers.

Ahead of them, what he sees is a flash of light; dim through the rain, hidden behind trunks of trees, and a shadowy figure moving behind it.

Tubbo's heart pounds loudly in his ears. Every muscle is tense, and he knows it's the same for everyone else too. Ever so slowly, Techno's arm lowers, reaches for the pocket his knife is kept.

The beam of light swings in their direction.

There's no time to react. Tubbo squints, blinded by the beam of light in his eyes, he feels someone grab the sleeve of his jacket—

“Bad?” Techno says, his voice utterly bewildered.

The beam of light lowers. Their neighbor stands, dripping with rain, and staring at them all in concern. “What the heck are you kids doing out here?”

---

Bad ushers the four of them to his car, parked much nearer by than Wilbur's. All the while, he rambles anxiously, a trait Quackity knows he passed to Sapnap.

“You're all going to catch your death of cold, it's dark and raining! What on earth were you four thinking? Even after everything that's been going on, you still thought it would be fine to all walk out here without any sort of warning? Your father's worried sick!”

“Then why were *you* out here in the dark too?” Tubbo asks, eyes narrowed.

Bad fixes him with a disapproving look. “Your father told me all three of you were missing, so I came out looking for you.”

“And you thought of the woods first?” Techno sounds less outrightly suspicious, but there's still a note of skepticism in his voice. They've gotten to the car now, and Bad opens the back door of his car, motioning inside of it.

“Not first, but it's where I went to look.” He waits as the four of them pile in, Wilbur up front because he's the tallest and the rest squishing into the back. “Phil's driving around town looking for you. Couldn't you have so much as left a note?”

“We weren't gone that long,” Wilbur says. “It's not that big of a deal.”

“Not that big of a deal?” Bad repeats incredulously. He starts the car. “Wilbur, need I remind you that there is a potential kidnapper in this town?”

“We know,” Tubbo and Wilbur snap at the same exact time. Quackity sinks back into the seat of the car. The tension in here is making him feel a little sick.

Bad lets out a sigh. The car starts down the gravel trail back towards town. “As soon as service kicks in, one of you call your father and tell him you’re on your way home.”

“Sure,” Wilbur mutters, just loud enough to be heard.

Silence falls over the car for a few moments.

“We drove out here,” Wilbur says, the one to break the silence. “You can just drop us off at my car and we’ll head back.”

“Absolutely not,” Bad says. “I’ll take you the whole way home and make sure you all get there safely, thank you very much.”

There’s no use arguing with Bad, although Wilbur tries it for a few minutes. Eventually he gives up, and the rest of the drive passes in silence.

All four of their phones buzz in unison when they cross the point that they get service back. An accidental glimpse at Techno’s screen reveals a string of notifications from Phil. Quackity pulls his gaze away quickly and focuses on his own phone.

There’s a few texts on his.

*(5:13) sapnap: how long are you and Karl gonna be out? I’m home now, if you wanna I’ll order dinner for all three of us*

*(5:20) sapnap: or not, just let me know if you guys are gonna eat out or wanna eat here or whatever*

*(6:31) sapnap: ?*

Quackity’s thumbs hover over the keyboard for a long minute. He distantly hears Wilbur’s voice on the phone with Phil, but he tunes it out and focuses on the screen in front of him.

*sorry i’m with wilbur now*

He deletes the text before sending it and tries again.

*have you heard from karl?*

Deletes that one too. Fuck.

What the hell is he supposed to say?

Bad pulls to a stop in front of their house. Tubbo pushes the door open almost before the car has stopped moving, making a beeline for the porch. Techno follows behind him, and Wilbur starts to get out, and—

“I can give you a ride to Sapnap’s, Quackity,” Bad says.

Quackity’s chest suddenly constricts. He feels like everything’s spinning just at those words, and it’s such a dumb thing to suddenly panic about, but he feels like he can’t breathe now, the idea of just *going back to Sapnap’s apartment*—

Karl could be there. Karl would be able to find him so easily, and he doesn’t know—he doesn’t know if he’d try again, if he’s going to show back up and something even worse will happen the next time...

Before he has a chance to wrestle his mind into forming words, Wilbur speaks up.

“You can spend the night here if you want, Q.”

Quackity latches onto the offer immediately, gratefully. “Okay. Yeah. I think I’m gonna do that.”

Quackity has not even made it through the front door, and already he can hear Phil inside tearing into Tubbo and Techno who’ve gone in ahead of them. Wilbur takes a deep breath, steeling himself, and steps inside. Quackity’s chest aches uncomfortably.

Phil is a good father, he reminds himself. Phil is just worried. This will not end badly.

He wonders if Tubbo ever has to remind himself of that too, or if it’s gotten easier over time, if he’s become so used to a safe family that it doesn’t cross his mind to be afraid of a voice that raises a little too loud. It’s been a long time. Maybe Quackity’s fears are not Tubbo’s fears.

Inside, Tubbo and Techno stand in the kitchen. Phil’s there too, arms crossed tightly over his chest and dark circles dug into the skin under his eyes. He looks absolutely exhausted. It’s the worst Quackity’s ever seen him, though it makes sense.

“And Techno, what the hell were you thinking?” Phil is saying. “You *just* got over being sick, and now you run out to the woods in the rain for *hours*? And taking Tubbo with you—”

“I’m capable of making my own decisions,” Tubbo interjects. “Techno doesn’t control me.”

“He’s right. We all went,” Wilbur says, jumping in to the conversation. “There’s equal fault on everyone.”

Phil glances over at Wilbur, and then he sees Quackity behind him, and something flashes across his face. He’s worried, upset, concerned, tired, and then his shoulders slump a few degrees. He drops his arms from where they’re folded tightly across his chest, posture loosening to something a little less angry.

“Hi Quackity,” he says.

“Hey,” Quackity says. His voice sounds hoarse. It’s been a long day. “Sorry for dragging your kids out to the woods. It was mostly my fault.”

“That’s not true,” Tubbo says. “It was—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Phil interrupts. He runs a hand over his eyes. “I’m not angry at any of you. Just worried.”

“We know,” Techno says. “You’re pretty obvious about that.”

“I got home and the house was completely empty,” Phil says. “No note, no texts, nothing. Next time you all feel like running off to the woods for hours without so much as a word, maybe give your poor old dad a heads up first, yeah?”

“Sorry,” chorus Tubbo, Techno, and Wilbur, overlapped apologies and assurances that they’ll do better next time.

Phil nods. “All right. Go dry off and warm up, I’ll get something in the oven for dinner. We’ll talk about this more later.”

For the second time today, Quackity borrows clothes from Wilbur.

There’s something strange in the air at dinner. Maybe it’s just Quackity, who hasn’t sat down for a family dinner in *years*, and even if this hardly counts as a family dinner - frozen pizza on paper plates while everyone eats in silence - it’s still the closest to it that he’s gotten in a long time.

It’s nicer than the ones he used to have, anyway.

It’s things like this that makes him wonder what it would’ve been like if he’d stayed. Phil had offered him a place with them, a seat at their table, and he could have taken it. He could’ve sat here every night, could’ve made these sorts of dinner normal for him, sat beside Wilbur and across from Tubbo.

A little pinprick of something sticks in his ribs. Jealousy, envy, longing. The feeling he got for Sapnap when they were kids and he wished Bad had been *his* dad.

He shakes it off before it has a chance to dig any deeper. This is not family; it never was, and it never will be.

“So,” Phil speaks up finally. “Do you four want to explain why exactly you decided to run off to the woods in the rain?”

The silence over the table turns awkward, heavy with everyone looking at one another. Like they’re all waiting for someone else to speak up.

“We were looking for Tommy,” Tubbo finally says. Phil frowns.

“Okay. Why?”

There’s a look on Tubbo’s face like he’s biting back an obvious answer. Wilbur takes this question.

“Quackity thought he saw someone out in the woods,” Wilbur says. “He came back here to tell us and we all decided to go investigate together.”

This doesn’t seem to clear anything up, judging by the furrowed brow that stays on Phil’s face. “You... saw someone?”

He’s looking at Quackity now. Something tightens in his throat, heart pounding at the attention on him. He could kick Wilbur for putting this part on him.

“Uh,” he says. “Yeah. I didn’t recognize them, and it freaked me out so I... I just came here.”

“Why were you in the woods in the first place?”

Quackity is going to strangle Wilbur. How much is he supposed to lie? Why are they lying to Phil at all? Why is he just going along with this? “Dunno. I just go out there sometimes. You can ask Sapnap, I do it all the time.”

Phil sighs, and his attention goes back to his own sons. Quackity breathes an inaudible sigh of relief. “And you all decided to run off instead of, I don’t know, *telling someone?*”

“We didn’t have any time to waste,” Wilbur defends. “If we waited around long enough to make a call, the person might’ve been gone.”

“Wilbur,” Phil says disapprovingly. “Do you understand how dangerous that was? If the person really was connected to Tommy--they could’ve been dangerous, they could be armed, and you just ran out there to meet them?”

“I brought a knife,” Techno offers. “We were armed too.”

Phil rubs his temples. “That... does not make it better.”

All of them sit in silence for a few moments longer. A clock in the hall ticks out the seconds.

“We get that it was stupid,” Wilbur says finally. “I’m sorry for not thinking to leave you a message. We just... There as a chance of finding Tommy, Dad. We had to go. Wouldn’t you have done the same?”

Phil gives him a long, heavy look. But he doesn’t argue. He sighs, gets to his feet, and looks between the four of them. “Okay. I’m going to call this in. Alex, would you be able to give a description of the person they saw if they ask for one?”

“Uh,” Quackity says, ever so eloquently and convincingly. “Sure.”

He nods, and he leaves the room. For a moment, silence hangs over them. Quackity turns to look at Wilbur.

“What the fuck, man?” he hisses. “What am I supposed to say if they ask me to describe this guy?”

“I don’t know,” Wilbur whispers back. “Make something up.”

“Make something up?” Quackity echoes. “Are you serious? Why are we even making anything up at all?”

“What, you wanna just tell him the truth?”

“I don’t know, maybe! Why not!”

“Yeah, let’s just send the police after Karl, who we think has something wrong with him that’s not just that he attempted homicide today, and some weird *thing* in the woods that wants Quackity to die, then,” Techno interjects dryly. “No, sorry officer, that’s all the information we’ve got, but trust us, there’s definitely something out there! That’ll be better.”

Quackity puts his head in his hands. “Fucking hell. I don’t know, maybe they *should* go looking for Karl. If his car was still there and there wasn’t a sign of him anywhere...”

“We’ll sort this out in the morning,” Wilbur says. “We’ll go looking for him again when we get my car back. If his car’s still there tomorrow, we call in a tip about him being missing. Sounds good?”

Doesn’t seem too much like he has a choice, so Quackity shrugs. “Sure. Yeah. Fine.”

They’ll just have to get through tonight, then. So much of Quackity’s life seems to be just *getting through* the day ahead of him. This won’t be any different.

Quackity lies on the couch staring up at the ceiling. Beside him and a little lower, Wilbur lies the same way.

First, Wilbur had offered him his bed. Quackity turned it down, assuring him he’d be fine with the couch. Wilbur looked like he wasn’t sure if he believed him or not, but he’d gone upstairs to get blankets and an extra pillow, and then he’d hesitated.

Quackity already knows it’s going to be a long night. He already knows what little sleep he does end up getting will be broken up by old memories turned over in his head into new horrors to keep him awake.

And Wilbur stands there in the living room, seeming to know this without Quackity speaking a word of it aloud, and finally he’d said it.

“I can sleep down here too if you want.”

This is one thing he hadn't fully considered when he'd taken Wilbur's offer to spend the night. He's going to be here *all* night, no matter what happens during it.

"Hey, Wil?"

"Hmm?"

Quackity turns his head to look at him. In the dark, he can just make out that Wilbur's eyes are closed.

"Wanted to say sorry in advance if I wake you up at all. You can go upstairs if it gets to be too much." Wilbur's eyes open at that. Quackity keeps going. "Just thought it would be fair to give you a warning."

Wilbur props himself up on one arm. "That's why I stayed down here, Q."

Quackity tries to collect his words. He tries to put them in order.

"Do you ever have dreams about it?"

Wilbur's gaze is heavy through the dark. "About..."

"About what we did."

Rain patters against the window. Upstairs, a floorboard creaks and settles.

"Every night."

"Yeah," Quackity says softly.

"I don't regret it," Wilbur says. "Not even in the dreams. He—He deserved it."

"Doesn't make it any easier."

"No," Wilbur agrees quietly. "No, it doesn't."

They don't really sleep. The presence of the other doesn't really make it easier.

But it does make the night a little less alone.

## Chapter End Notes

i kinda keep forgetting to mention but!! if anybody wants to hang out on tumblr n see my ramblings about dsmp in general and this fic specifically, feel free to follow me over there @rebelpeas!! i've got art for the fic there too if that's tempting at all :3



thank you so so much as always for reading, leaving kudos, bookmarking,  
recommending the story to friends, and of course, my beloved commenters <3 you are  
all so lovely and i hope your day is wonderful!

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

It sends his own heart into a panic immediately, and his chest tightens, painful and aching with a sort of emptiness. The strange echoing of dual heartbeats lines up wrong now, one beating faster than the other, and it's unnerving enough to make the hair on his arms raise. His entire body feels on edge.

The whispering is louder too now, volume and intensity gradually rising. It's almost all he can hear, racing heartbeats and a cacophony of voices all calling for something, someone—

Oh.

Oh, fuck, it's happening again.

## Chapter Notes

WEDNESDAY UPDATE WOO hi guys how are you all :3 i hope you are all well and having a good week!!

this chapter turned out a little funny because i cut a few scenes from it so i kept looking at the wordcount like 'really? is that all there is?' but whatever! it's got everything i wanted to put in it so i guess it's done!

content warnings for all the usual. everybody's a mess and it's just gonna keep getting worse! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sound of a distant pounding drags Quackity from his sleep.

He'd only really been dozing, having slipped back and forth between wakefulness and a sleep that doesn't quite count for most of the night. Sometime before the sun came up, both he and Wilbur had been awake and quietly conversing, and Quackity considered asking if they wanted to just get up and call it quits for the night. He would've if he'd seen the sun, but in the end, they both drift off again, Quackity now on the carpeted floor at Wilbur's side.

Wilbur is no longer at his side.

Sleepily, he pries his eyes open to see his floor-dwelling companion stumbling from the living room, one blanket draped over his shoulders like a cape. It's a funny enough sight that Quackity nearly laughs at it despite the somber atmosphere that hung over them all night.

Quackity levers himself upright, sitting on the floor to groggily blink himself awake. From the kitchen, he hears Wilbur's footsteps, the rattle of a doorknob, and a voice that sounds like...

"Hey. Is Quackity here?"

It's muffled from the distance, but he'd recognize the voice anywhere. Quackity is fully awake in an instant. He gets to his feet and follows in Wilbur's footsteps.

As Quackity enters the room, Wilbur looks back over his shoulder. Behind him, standing in the doorway, is Sapnap. He looks like a mess, hair loose around his shoulders, tired lines under his eyes, t-shirt rumpled under the hoodie he'd thrown on over it, hastily by the looks of things.

A sting of guilt passes through Quackity's chest. He never had texted him back last night. Never had figured out what words to use.

"*Quackity.*" A few things cross over Sapnap's face in a split second. His eyes widen in relief, and then narrow again, confusion, concern, something in the direction of anger. Quackity can't blame him for it.

"Hi," Quackity says. He picks at the sleeve of his - well, Wilbur's - sweatshirt. "Uh. Sorry. I... I forgot to text you back."

"Yeah, you did," Sapnap says, voice sounding like he's carefully biting back stronger words. Quackity winces. Sapnap glares at him.

This is uncomfortable. Quackity has no idea what to say. The clock above the oven reads 7:01. Way too early for this.

"I'm gonna..." Wilbur's voice trails off as he points vaguely across the house. "Gotta... Yeah. I'll be back."

And then it's just Quackity and Sapnap in the kitchen, and he cannot think of anything to say.

He could blurt it out. Just tell Sapnap the truth and watch the shock and confusion flood across his face, watch as Sapnap begins to crack from the pressure of the thing that spins inside of him and tells him he needs to take care of everyone all the time, that worries and worries—

"Listen," Sapnap says before Quackity can say anything at all. "You're... You can make your own decisions and do whatever you want, I get it. I don't control you and you don't owe me, like, a play by play of your every move or whatever. But holy shit, Q, I was *fucking terrified.*"

Quackity's chest stings. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

“You just—you just fucking disappeared on me.” Sapnap runs his hand through his hair, pushing a few stray pieces back from his forehead. “I didn’t hear from you or Karl the whole day, and I get home and there’s no sign of either of you, and I’m trying not to stress out but nobody’s answered me. And then *my dad* calls me? To say he picked you up in the woods? What the hell, man! I don’t even get a text?”

“I’m *sorry*,” Quackity echoes once again. He doesn’t know what else to say. He feels fuzzy and his hands feel heavy. Sapnap is upset at him, he’s finally pushed him too far, and it aches and aches.

“He called and asked if we’d had a fight or something,” Sapnap continues, “because it seemed like you were hesitant to come back to mine and—if I did something wrong, you can just tell me and I’ll fix it, I’ll back off if I’m being too much, you don’t have to just *disappear* —”

“Sapnap,” Quackity interrupts. He feels miserable. “No. No, that wasn’t—you didn’t do anything, Sap, I promise. It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it?” Sapnap looks at him, confused, pleading. “What *happened*?”

And Quackity’s breath is stuck in his throat. His hands weigh heavy at his sides.

“Have you heard from Karl?” he asks first. Testing the water.

“No,” Sapnap said. “Quackity, *please*.”

God.

Fuck.

Okay. Okay, they can get through this. He can... He can figure this out. They’ll figure this out.

Sapnap needs to know. It’s—Karl’s *his* boyfriend. He deserves to know the truth.

“I’m going to gather up my stuff,” Quackity says. “Give me a minute, and then we can go. I’ll explain everything in the car.”

Sapnap waits for him in the car. On the porch, Wilbur stops him with a hand on his sleeve, just out the door.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Wil asks. “Yesterday was... a lot.”

Quackity gives him something as close to a smile as he can manage. “I’ll be okay. Thanks, Wilbur.”

It's been a long time since he and Wilbur were friends. But he thinks maybe they are again. The irony is not lost on him that Quackity's first attempted murder is what drove them apart, and the second has brought them back together. It's so twistedly morbid and perfect.

In the car, Sapnap drums his fingers on the steering wheel, staring straight through the windshield even as Quackity gets in the passenger seat. They both sit in silence for a long moment.

"So," Sapnap says finally, words curt. "You wanna explain?"

Here goes nothing. "Something's wrong with Karl."

Sapnap's head snaps to the side, eyes fixed on Quackity. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he tried to kill me," Quackity says, and it surprises him more than anything that the words come out of his mouth smoothly and calmly. Sapnap's expression looks blank.

*"What?"*

"He took me out to the woods yesterday," Quackity says, "and he tried to kill me. Did a shit job of it, worst attempt on my life I've ever seen, honestly, but he gave it his best shot so props to him for effort, I guess."

"Quackity," Sapnap says sharply. The attempts at humor die in his throat. "What the *fuck*? Why did—Did you—Where is Karl?"

"Hell if I know," Quackity says. "I ran as fast as I could and didn't look back, and when we went back out looking for him, he was gone."

"Holy shit." Sapnap scrubs a hand over his face, all exhaustion and disbelief and that shattering of concern. "You—Holy fuck. Did you call anyone? Is anyone looking for him? Shit, Q, why wouldn't you *call me*—"

Guilt tangles itself up in Quackity's stomach once again. Something below the pile of regret tangled up like string aches a little differently too. A more bitter sting.

"I just didn't know what to do." It's a lame defense, and he knows it. "Everything... it was so much, and I just... I don't know. I didn't know how to tell you."

"Fucking hell," Sapnap says, and his voice shakes like he's having a hard time keep it under control. Quackity cringes. "Jesus, Q! We could've—I could've helped, we—we could've figured this out."

"I'm sorry," Quackity says again. He sounds so small. He hates it. Clears his throat, tries again. Makes his words sound bigger than he is. Vulnerability is a weakness when someone is angry. "I should've done better."

Sapnap's head snaps to the side again. His gaze is sharp enough to bore holes into Quackity, staring at him with a look that he can't quite fathom, intense and... and *too much*. He looks away, and he feels his breath picking up in his chest.

Fuck.

Sapnap's been mad at him before. Sapnap's been mad at *everyone* before; his temper flares quick and furious, and Quackity knows it burns down just as fast. But this—this is different.

This is about Karl. This is about the person Sapnap loves more than anything.

It stings, it stings, *it stings* in his chest like nothing else, and he hates that it does - this is all such a mess, and all he can picture of Karl is a slightly vacant smile and a bruising grip on his hand and he's *afraid* of him, he thinks. He's afraid of Karl, and he's afraid of Sapnap's fury, and he's so scared of it that he'd rather run back inside to Wilbur and never face any of this.

And maybe Sapnap knows that, because he says, "Okay. Get out of the car."

Quackity's heart drops to his stomach. He feels numb; he doesn't look at Sapnap as he fumbles with the handle of the car and gets it open. Stumbles his way out, onto the street, onto the sidewalk beside it. And Sapnap—

Sapnap gets out too.

Quackity's breath is caught in his chest, and he feels like he's rooted to the concrete sidewalk under his feet. Something bolts him down there, traps him and keeps him from moving, and all he can do is watch as Sapnap crosses around to the front of the car.

*Calm down*, Quackity is thinking to himself, because Sapnap cares about him even when he's angry and even if Quackity will always be second place to Karl, even then—

"I'm gonna hug you," Sapnap says. "Stop me if you don't want me to."

And then Sapnap's arms are around Quackity.

Just like that, Quackity's insides are a mess, tangled and loud and aching and empty all at once. He's confused, and the guilt is still there, and he's—he isn't supposed to be vulnerable, but Sapnap's hugging him, and he's...

He's not angry?

Very slowly, Quackity settles his hands on Sapnap's back. Tears sting his eyes, and his hands are shaking, and...

"You're not mad at me?" Quackity asks, and his voice is shaking too, *fuck*. He's terrible at this keeping it together shit.

"What? No, I'm—shit, I'm sorry, Q." Sapnap squeezes him tighter. "I'm not mad at you, holy shit, why would I be mad at you? I'm worried, and I don't really know what's going on and it's freaking me out, like, a *lot*, but I'm definitely not mad at you."

Quackity feels like he could collapse right there, but Sapnap is here to keep him upright, so he doesn't. He clings to him, maybe more than he should, maybe - but maybe not. If Sapnap isn't going to let go, then neither is Quackity.

“We’ll figure this out,” Sapnap says quietly. “We’ll find Karl, and we’ll figure this out.”

“Okay,” Quackity says, and he lets himself believe Sapnap’s promise.

---

Tubbo did not sleep much last night. If he had to guess, he’d say none of them did. When he wakes up, he’s still tired and everything from the night before looms over him like an angry cloud.

Everything is falling apart. Everything *has* been falling apart, and Tubbo is starting to think he might not be able to hold the pieces together for much longer.

There’s whatever had happened with Techno yesterday, and there’s the fact that Ranboo never showed up when he was supposed to, and there’s something going on with Karl and something in the woods, and there’s Quackity who thinks he’s supposed to be dead, and Tubbo doesn’t know what that means for *himself*, if Quackity really thinks that’s the case. There’s a list of names on printer paper in his backpack. Part of him wonders how he ever thought that was going to help.

He needs to pick one thing at a time and work on it, because there is far too much for him to think about it all right now. He’ll pick one problem, and he’ll solve that, and then he’ll move on to the next.

When he goes downstairs, Wilbur is awake and in the kitchen. There’s no sign of Quackity, but Wilbur is hanging up his - or Techno’s - keys on the side of the fridge. Must’ve gone to get the car from where it was left in the woods overnight.

So he starts there.

“Can you drive me to Ranboo’s?”

Wilbur blinks at him. He picks up the keys he’d just set down. “Sure. Now?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo says. “We were supposed to meet yesterday and he never showed up, and I’d walk, but I don’t know where he lives. You drove him home that one night, though, right? So you know.”

“I do,” Wilbur agrees, but there’s something funny in his voice. Like there’s a piece he’s not saying. “Get your jacket, I’ll drive you over now.”

The house that Wilbur stops in front of is one Tubbo’s pretty sure he’s walked past a dozen times without ever really looking at it. The white siding is mildewed and dirty, which makes

it fit right in with every other building on this street. There's not a speck of personality on it; the porch is empty save a pile of rotting newspapers that have been left in front of the door.

"This is it?" Tubbo asks skeptically. Wilbur peers out the window at the house.

"Yeah. You want me to walk with you to the door, or stay here?"

"I don't care," Tubbo says.

Wilbur gets out of the car.

They walk up to the porch together, wooden boards creaking under their feet. The windows into the house are grimy and obscured by blinds. Tubbo knocks on the door, and he waits.

It doesn't make a lot of sense for Ranboo to just be here and have forgotten to meet Tubbo - but then again, he said he has a bad memory, didn't he? Maybe he did just forget. Maybe Ranboo will open the door, and then he'll remember and apologize and things will be fine, and Wilbur can drive them to McDonalds to get something to eat. And Ranboo will be fine and that will be one less problem for Tubbo to worry about.

No one answers the door.

Tubbo knocks again, and he tries to peer through the window, through the blinds obscuring it. Wilbur stands behind him, hands in pockets, and he looks worried too.

"This isn't like him," Tubbo mumbles. "He's always hanging around wherever I am. It's not like him to just disappear."

"Maybe his family went out of town," Wilbur suggests. "And he forgot to tell you?"

Tubbo fixes him with a glare. It's a fair theory, but it doesn't seem like Ranboo...

"You kids looking for someone?"

Tubbo whirls around. Standing on the sidewalk below the porch is a man Tubbo doesn't know, a dog's leash in one hand. He peers up at the two of them.

"Sort of," Wilbur says. "Do you know the people who live here?"

"I know the people who *lived* there," the man says. His dog sniffs at Tubbo's feet. "They moved at least a month ago. Haven't seen anybody move in yet."

Something cold runs through Tubbo. "What? *This* house? Are you sure?"

"Very sure," the man says. He pulls his dog back to his side. "I can see if I have their number if you want to get in touch with them."

"That's okay," Wilbur assures him. "Thank you, though!"



Tubbo feels like the world might open up under his feet and send him falling down straight into the core of it. Anxiety itches under his skin. He doesn't understand, why would—they can't have moved a month ago, it doesn't make any sense...

Wilbur peers through the window himself. Tubbo holds on to his own arms, wrapped around himself.

This doesn't make sense.

"I don't get it," Tubbo mumbles, to himself, to Wilbur, he doesn't know. "Why... You're sure this is the house you dropped him at?"

Wilbur runs a hand through his hair, fixes his beanie. "I'm sure," he says, but he looks nervous. "Tubbo—"

"What?" It comes out sharper than he means it too. Wilbur winces.

"He... I didn't see him go inside," Wilbur says. Tubbo's heart nearly stops in his chest. "He went around the back, and I figured he used the back door, but I... I remembered because I thought it was weird that I didn't see any of the lights go on."

Tubbo stares at him. "You... Oh my god. Fuck, he doesn't live here, he's been lying to me this entire fucking time and I... Why wouldn't you tell me that?" Holy shit, no wonder Ranboo was always coming up with every reason to walk home instead of accepting a ride. He doesn't live here, he probably doesn't live *anywhere*— "You just saw that happen and drove back home like nothing was wrong?"

"What else was I supposed to do?" Wilbur goes on the defensive. "I just thought he was sneaking in or something, and knocking on the front door would've made things worse—"

"He's fucking homeless," Tubbo says. "He's—Jesus, he's homeless and someone's tried to hurt him in the past and now he's missing and you could've just brought him back home that night!"

Wilbur's expression changes, something more concerned now. "Tubbo. What do you mean, someone's tried to hurt him?"

"He's—" Tubbo gestures with his hands, trying to put his words together and not get so upset that he might cry while he does it. "The mask he wears, there's—he's hiding a scar under it, a really big nasty one and the way he talked about it made it sound like someone did it to him. Like it wasn't an accident."

"Shit," Wilbur says. And louder. "Shit. We have to find him."

Tubbo wants to scream. Just put his hands over his ears and squeeze his eyes shut and *scream*, until his throat is hoarse and his lungs are aching. This isn't fair. This is what he was afraid of. *Nobody he cares about is safe from him.*

"We'll find him," Wilbur promises. "We'll find him. It's gonna be okay."

They look for him. They look for him until Tubbo cries, frustrated and angry tears leaking onto Wilbur's jacket as he lets Wilbur hug him. They look even longer after that, until Phil calls them home. Tubbo's whole world is falling apart on foundations that broke the moment Tommy walked out of their room, and maybe even longer before that.

---

Techno sits in his room, and the sun has set outside, and a heart beats heavy in his ears.

He doesn't know what he's trying to accomplish at this point - his laptop is open in front of him, half a dozen half-hearted attempts at a google search left in opened tabs. He remembers he's looking for something, but he forgets what, and then he opens a new tab.

And then he zones out too, listening to the quiet thump in his ears that beats almost in time with the one in his chest. Just the slightest echo. Almost loud enough to cover the whispering sound echoing in his head.

It's incredibly distracting. He's trying so hard to focus, but this heartbeat and the voices murmuring something just out of reach make that so difficult. He can't make out what the whispering is saying, which is normal. He's not entirely convinced that they even speak words, but rather just overlapping sounds, muttering that isn't intended to be communication at all and only serves to bother him.

And then he hears something else.

In his head, the heartbeat there stutters. A single beat skips and falls out of time with the steady rhythm he's grown used to.

It sends his own heart into a panic immediately, and his chest tightens, painful and aching with a sort of emptiness. The strange echoing of dual heartbeats lines up wrong now, one beating faster than the other, and it's unnerving enough to make the hair on his arms raise. His entire body feels on edge.

The whispering is louder too now, volume and intensity gradually rising. It's almost all he can hear, racing heartbeats and a cacophony of voices all calling for something, *someone* —

Oh.

Oh, fuck, it's happening again.

Techno stumbles to his feet while he still has awareness of the room he's in, knows he's going to lose that awareness if this goes the same way it had before. The voices grow louder.

More insistent. He doesn't know what it is they want, what they're calling for, but he knows they'll sweep him up and carry him along with them. A deep terror stabs through him.

"Tubbo," he says, and his voice is too quiet and hoarse, he's only at the door to his bedroom and he's not sure where everyone is in the house— "Tubbo!"

Tubbo is on the stairs. "What?"

They lock eyes. Techno heaves aching breaths that tear out of his chest as if they have claws. Worry floods Tubbo's face, screws his features into a creased pattern of concern.

"It's happening again."

Tubbo's eyes go impossibly wide. "Oh, shit."

The voices *scream*.

Techno's hands go over his ears, as if that's going to do anything to block them out. Vaguely, he's aware of Tubbo's hands on his shoulders, guiding him along, and he dimly feels his body respond. The heart in his head pounds, louder, louder, and he can't remember which one is his and which isn't, or maybe they're *both* his, maybe—maybe this heartbeat is him too, maybe this is what he's turning into, maybe this thing that calls and screams in his head is all that he is.

They call and call, and they're calling *for* someone. He's caught up in it, swept along in the emotion, and he feels his chest ache for them, for the person they want to find...

"Quackity," Techno gasps, and his voice sounds muddy and faraway but he gets the word out. "Where's—if this is happening again—"

"I'll text him," Tubbo's muffled voice tells him.

"They want someone," Techno says, panicked and rambling as he tries to get out the words all caught up in his head and in his chest. The heart - his, not his, theirs - tugs at him. It calls and aches. "I don't—I don't know—where is everyone, is-is-is Wilbur—"

"Downstairs." Tubbo's hands rest on his arms, grounding, and he focuses on them. "We're all here. We're safe."

They're calling for someone. They're loud and screaming for it, desperate and hungry and calling, and Techno's whole body shakes with the effort of keeping himself here, kneeling on the ground in Tubbo's room, focusing on his voice—

"...keep listening to me, okay? You're okay. Everyone's okay, whatever you're hearing—"

It's all so, so loud.

And then, suddenly but smoothly, it is dark and he is not in Tubbo's room. It is dark and something wraps around him and he feels like he can't move or breathe—

No, he's still in Tubbo's room. He feels the ghost of hands on his arms and he hears his brother's voice like one of the whispers in his head. He clings to it.

The darkness melts around him before he has time to look around. The heart beats loud, but he doesn't see Tommy before—

—before he's here instead, ghosts on his arms and heart in his head, and trees around him and leaves beneath his feet and panic stutters in his chest, loud and confused, and he doesn't know how he got here, he doesn't remember. He hears voices and he knows them but he can't remember how, he hears a cacophony of wordless pleas calling for *him*, he hears a boy's voice tell him he's going to be okay, he hears someone else above it all and he's *afraid*. He can't remember why he's here, he can't—

“—gonna be okay,” a voice says.

—*been waiting so long*, a voice says.

“—won't be running away again,” a voice says.

The heart pounds in his ears. It tugs him in too many directions, to stay, to run, to lie himself down and give in. He's tired, he's terrified, he's trying to keep hold of himself and he doesn't even remember who *himself* is supposed to be—

And then there's the crack of a gunshot, an explosion so loud it shatters the sound of every other voice. Pain bursts inside of him, blinding and white-hot and his throat is hoarse and his eyes are heavy and he's tired and he hurts and he can't remember. There are ghostly hands gripping his arms tighter and tighter, there is something empty in his chest and now it's open and dripping all down the front of him, it aches and aches and aches.

“—okay, stay with me—”

Hot tears on his face, hands pressed over his ears so hard it almost hurts.

The heart beats and the voices call.

He wants to lay down and make it all stop. His chest is torn open and it hurts. He—

“Techno, breathe with me, okay? In like this, ready—”

His breath stutters in his broken lungs. Hands move from his arms, and there's another one on his back, and it's too many hands but he can't figure out why.

“You've got it, just like that. Try it again, nice and slow with me.”

The voice is different. It's not—this isn't Tubbo. But it's comfort and safety anyway, and Techno listens. He gasps in a breath that rattles and aches in his chest, and it escapes his mouth much too soon but the person beside him praises him for it all the same.

“Perfect. And again, okay? You’re all right.”

It’s Wilbur. Techno wants to collapse against his twin, even though he doesn’t know how he got here. Tubbo still kneels at his other side.

Achingly, he drags in one more breath and lets it out.

“How...” he mumbles, looking up at Wilbur. “Why...”

He can’t get it out in a full sentence, but Tubbo picks up on the question he’s trying to ask and supplies the answer all the same.

“Everyone kinda heard you screaming, boss man,” Tubbo says. “That’s why Wilbur’s here.”

Ah.

Techno crumples a little, slumped forward to the ground. There’s no blood under him and nothing dripping from his chest. It feels unsettling to be all in one piece.

His head spins, trying to collect the pieces of every that had just happened. He feels like he needs to lie down and sleep for days. He feels like he’ll never be able to rest again.

“You, uh,” Wilbur starts. “You wanna explain that? What just happened?”

Techno doesn’t bother picking himself up from the floor. Exhaustion weighs down his limbs.

“He’s gonna be out of it for a few minutes,” Tubbo says. “That’s what he did last time too.”

“Last time?” Wilbur echoes. Sharp worry steeps his voice. “How much does this happen? What have I *missed*?”

“Just happened once before,” Tubbo says. “Yesterday, while we were at McDonalds. He’d finally calmed down right before you texted, and then it was all so much that I forgot to bring it up again.”

It happened before. Right before Wilbur texted. Right before everything with Quackity.

At the same time as everything with Quackity.

The heartbeat in Techno’s head is quieter but it continues to beat.

“Somebody has to check on Quackity,” Techno mumbles without raising his head.

“He’s with Sapnap,” Tubbo says. “I already texted and got an answer.”

“What does this have to do with Quackity?” Wilbur interjects. “Can someone please explain?”

“Techno hears voices,” Tubbo says bluntly. “He thinks they’re not hallucinations, but something or someone talking to him, and they know where Tommy is. And, I guess have something to do with Quackity, since that’s all he’d talk about this time.”

He's tired, but he opens his mouth again. "Happened at the same time as everything with Karl and Quackity. They were all screaming about wanting someone, and then Q says Karl was saying the same shit at the same exact time. So unless me an' Karl are having shared hallucinations..."

Wilbur stares at him. "So you think this—this voice that you hear, it wants Quackity?"

"Dunno," Techno says. "Guess they didn't want him tonight if he's fine."

"What were they saying tonight?" Tubbo asks. He sounds a little hesitant, and Techno knows he's not totally convinced about all of this, but his need to figure things out evidently outweighs the skepticism.

"Lots of stuff," Techno says. "It was loud. Uh... Calling for someone again. Seemed angrier than yesterday, though?"

Tubbo frowns. Wilbur looks confused and like he has no idea what to make of any of this, which is fair enough, Techno supposes.

In a moment like an abrupt click, Techno's mind settles back into place. He sits up, and there is still no blood on the floor because there never was, but—

"Somebody's hurt," he says abruptly. "In the woods, someone had a gun, and somebody's hurt now."

"What?" Tubbo's frown deepens. "Was that in—in what you heard just now?"

"Felt," Techno corrects. "Dunno who actually got shot, but I felt it. It's bad."

"Holy shit," Wilbur says. "Okay, so—so if this is true, if you really—if everything you heard and felt is real, then... What do we do?"

"Considering someone just got *shot*," Techno says dryly, "and is now bleeding to their presumable death in the woods, I think the right answer might be to go find them. Maybe call an ambulance."

Wilbur shoots Techno a look, but before he can say anything, a new sound interrupts them: footsteps on the stairs and their dad's voice.

"Boys?"

It's a rushed call, one word, clipped and short to get all of their attention as one. Techno's heart - the one in his chest - drops to his stomach in immediate dread.

"In here, Phil," Tubbo calls, and the door swings open.

Phil is wearing his paramedic uniform jacket, or half-wearing it, in the process of shrugging it over his shoulders with his pager in one hand, which crackles with a voice still sharing details.

“—off of East Maple and Fourth.” Techno knows that address. It’s near the woods.

“Are you going on a call?” Wilbur asks.

“Yeah,” Phil says, but his voice is tight and stressed. His words spill out quickly, like he’s rushing to get all the information out. “I want you all to be ready to meet me at the hospital.”

“What?” The word jumps from all of their mouths nearly at once. Wilbur asks, “Who is it?”

“I think it’s Ranboo,” Phil says. “I need to go, I love you guys.”

And then he’s gone, rushing back down the stairs and out the door as the dispatcher repeats the address.

Tubbo’s hand is over his mouth, eyes wide and staring after where Phil had been standing moments before.

“This has to be some freaky coincidence,” Wilbur is saying. “This—it’s probably not related to Techno’s thing, he—he’s been missing since yesterday, he could’ve just been hurt somewhere and someone finally found him...”

“East Maple leads right into the woods,” Techno says. A panicked gasp leaves Tubbo’s mouth, and Wilbur glares at Techno for it. Techno would glare back, but he feels fuzzy. He thinks about the hole in his torn open chest dripping all over the ground.

The heart beats in his ears.

## Chapter End Notes

ALSO EVERYONE LOOK AT THIS INCREDIBLE PIECE OF FANART FOR CHAPTER ELEVEN. LOOK AT THIS COMIC. it's so incredible, you all are legally obligated to go look at it and give the artist some love because it's fantastic:  
<https://honeyblockm.tumblr.com/post/661668465861623808/guess-whos-back-with-another-comic-big-spoilers>

as always thank u sm for reading/commenting/leaving kudos/etc!! we're really getting into the endgame of the fic, so start placing your bets on theories now :3

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

“This is all my fault.”

Techno tilts his head to look at Tubbo. “It’s not.”

“It is,” Tubbo repeats, more forcefully. “I’ve known him the longest. I even said—I knew there was something wrong this whole time. I knew someone had hurt him, and I was always worried he wasn’t safe. I knew it. This is my fault.”

## Chapter Notes

it’s definitely sunday here shhhh

hello beloved readers how are u all this fine sunday update day <33 i’m sleepy so i’m gonna go to bed again as soon as i post this and hopefully not regret saving it til later so i can do more edits

sleepy authors note time: you guys are all so cool and lovely and sweet, thank you for your comments every single chapter aa!! i was telling someone i literally have the FUNNIEST ao3 commenters and it’s 100% true. i was writing down all the theories i’ve been told for this story and some of them are just so good. shoutout to quackitree, boy carbon, and the catfish ranboo theory. you guys are nuts ily

EDIT: LOOK LOOK MORE ART LOOK AT IT!! it’s so so good!! please please go give the artist some love! <https://dluedrwams.tumblr.com/post/662092072020492288/i-recently-read-rebelpeas-s-devil-town-and-i>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They’ve been in the waiting room at the hospital for almost two hours, and Tubbo is nearly asleep on Techno’s shoulder. The chairs are far from comfortable, and Techno’s legs are on the verge of falling asleep and cramping up from it, but he stays seated anyway. Tubbo’s worn himself out with worry, and if he can rest a little here while they wait, Techno will do anything he can to make sure it stays that way.

Wilbur sits on Tubbo’s other side, and Phil’s just out of sight, up at a desk pestering the receptionists for updates once again. That’s just how he is, Techno thinks. It’s a little sweet, how quickly he’s decided Ranboo is his to look after too.



They haven't heard anything about him the entire time they've been here. He's in surgery, and it's been hours of tense waiting while they sit here in these uncomfortable chairs and do nothing but *wait*. Tubbo's cried twice, and it aches in Techno every time he does. The first time, he'd done it quietly, sniffing without lifting his head from Techno's shoulder. Neither of them said anything about it, because Techno knows Tubbo is the same as he is and doesn't want his tears to be acknowledged. Vulnerability is uncomfortable and it's easier to let it slide without a word, so Techno just settles his own arm around Tubbo and squeezes gently and he says nothing.

The second time, Techno had gotten up to use the restroom, and when he gets back, Tubbo is crumpled into Wilbur's arms, and Phil is standing by them both with his cell phone at his ear. His father's face is painted with devastation.

Immediately, his stomach twists and the heart in his chest sinks so low he thinks he might throw it up. Wilbur makes eye contact with Techno, and Techno can read the sadness in his gaze without a single word.

"What?" Techno asks, the only word he can stumble out of his mouth that feels clumsy and numb. He's afraid of what he's going to hear next, steels himself for the news, that Ranboo's taken a turn for the worse, that Ranboo is...

It's not even about Ranboo, though. What Wilbur says, ever so quietly and gently, is, "Tommy. It was his blood on the hoodie. Dad just got the call."

Oh.

Tubbo makes a strangle, muffled sound. Wilbur wraps his arms around him tighter.

Techno feels fuzzy. He feels a little like his head isn't in his body, a disconnect only furthered by the beating heart in his ears that isn't the same as the one in his chest. This... The thing Wilbur says doesn't settle. It doesn't fit. It doesn't sound real.

"Oh," Techno says.

But he can hear Tommy. He knows Tommy is still within his reach. He knows he can still find him, because he hasn't yet, but he *can*. He will.

Phil hangs up the phone, scrubs a hand over his face. He looks so tired. He looks sadder than Techno can put into words, and he looks older too, and he knows they all joke about him being an old man, but something about this sits wrong with him. The expression on his face is so strong that Techno can't look at his face, at his eyes, because the disconnect feels unsettling and *wrong*. His father gives him an expression Techno can't stomach, broken and sad, and he opens his arms, offering a hug.

Techno feels like he can't move. His arms are stiff and heavy, and his legs feel rooted to the ground. For a moment, his chest feels so empty he doesn't even know if he can breathe.

The expectation tears at him. Phil looks at him, all sad and waiting, and Wilbur is already hugging Tubbo and Techno is just *standing there*. He can't move. Tommy's heart beats in his

head. Tommy is fine. He can't say that to his father.

Phil's arms fall before Techno can figure out what to do, can remember how to make his limbs move. His face falls a little too. He doesn't try again.

So now Techno's sitting back in these uncomfortable hospital waiting room chairs, and Tubbo dozes lightly on his shoulder while Wilbur types on his phone and Techno wishes he had anything else to do but *wait*.

The police were here earlier, questioning all of them on what they knew of Ranboo. Tubbo spilled everything - that he'd met him almost two weeks ago and had never once seen him before, that he wore the same corduroy jacket every time he saw him, he didn't know his last name and he lied about where he lived, and then he'd simply disappeared. There's nothing else for the rest of them to tell.

"There's no record of him that we've found," the officer he assumed is assigned to Ranboo's case had told him. "And it's hard to search without a last name or any other identifying information. But we'll keep looking."

After that, Phil spoke to the officer quietly. Techno had caught the words "*temporary custody*" and "*qualified foster parent*." He didn't need to listen in any more than that to know what's happening.

Phil walks back to join the rest of them now, leaving the poor receptionists in peace. His eyebrows are creased with the constant stress that's lived on them for the past two weeks.

"Anything?" Techno asks. Tubbo stirs on his shoulder, blinking sleepily up at Phil.

"He's supposed to be out of surgery by now," Phil said. "They say a nurse will let us know when he's settled and give us an update."

"Can we see him?" Tubbo asks.

"They'd better let us," Wilbur says. His voice is sleepy too. Sounds like he might've been dozing off as well. "We've been waiting for ages."

Phil gives a tired smile. "I think they will. It isn't like he has any other family here to see him."

That's met with a somber sort of silence. All of them are thinking at the same time, and Techno would guess it's about the same thing. Ranboo doesn't seem to have a family at *all*, and they're all wishing they'd noticed it sooner. Before the kid ended up in the hospital after getting *shot*.

That was something Techno had questioned the officer about. Maybe not the way that sort of thing was supposed to go, but they all wanted answers. They didn't get any, met with calm responses of '*we're looking into it*' and '*I'm not able to share that information currently*' which drove Techno up a fucking wall. Somebody had shot Ranboo. Somebody had tried to kill him. He wants answers.

“Do you think this has anything to do with whoever took Tommy?” Phil had asked.

“We’re looking into it,” the officer had said again.

Something inside of Techno whispers to go looking on his own. He wants answers, and he’ll get them himself if he has to. He’s just not sure if the pull to the woods is purely wanting answers, or something else entirely.

A little while later, Techno’s roused from his thoughts when the waiting room door swings open. A nurse stands in the doorway, scans the waiting room for a moment, and her eyes settle on the four of them.

“Are you Ranboo’s family?” the nurse asks, clipboard in hand.

That does something funny in Techno’s chest. The way they’re all still perceived as one family, even after everything. Maybe this is the closest they’ve been to being one in a long, long time.

“The closest he has to it for now,” Phil says. “How is he?”

“Still asleep,” she says. “But the surgery went smoothly. We’ll run some more tests tomorrow after he’s had some time to recover from this.”

Tubbo’s voice speaks up, quiet and small. “He’ll be okay?”

She nods. Her smile is gentle. “He’s going to be okay.”

An almost audible breath of relief releases from all four of them. The tension they’ve all been carrying begins to ease.

“Can we see him?”

She looks between the four of them, contemplating. “Visitation is immediate family-only.”

“I’m quite literally in the process of applying to be his foster parent,” Phil says. “We’re family.”

“We’ve been waiting for hours,” Wilbur presses.

“Okay,” she relents. “Two at a time. It’s a small room.”

Tubbo gets to his feet with no hesitation. The rest of them look between each other for a moment.

Wilbur nods his head towards the door. “You go, Tech. I’ll wait with Dad.”

Techno gets to his feet and catches up with Tubbo, and the two of them follow after the nurse as she leads them down the hall she’d just come from. Her voice lowers to a hush.

“He’s still under the anaesthetic,” she tells them, “and it might be awhile before he wakes up even outside of that. Be patient and don’t try to wake him.”

“We won’t,” Tubbo says. “I just want to see him.”

She nods, and then gestures to a door, mostly closed and darkened inside. “I’ll be just down the hall if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Techno says. Tubbo is already pushing open the door.

Inside this hospital room, Techno feels something suffocatingly sad. It’s a small room, just barely big enough for the one bed and a monitor that beeps heartlessly beside it, and two chairs - one by the monitor, the other squished into a corner against the wall. The lights are dimmed low, and the window across the room doesn’t add any extra light.

Ranboo looks...

He looks bad, if Techno’s going to be honest.

He looks small and far too thin in nothing but a hospital gown, blanket pulled up to his chest and showing just *how* thin his arms are without the corduroy jacket hiding them. And without the mask, his face looks the same way, thin and lined with something that Techno can’t help but attribute to malnutrition now.

And there’s the scar, the one Tubbo had told him about days ago, sat on the kitchen counter late at night. Back when Tubbo had first told him he was worried, and Techno thinks with a pang of guilt that he could’ve, *should’ve*, taken it more seriously then.

The scar’s an odd one. It’s red and sore-looking, but Techno couldn’t guess what made it, lines of irritated skin criss-crossing over one another and stretching across most of the lower half of his face. It’s on his neck a bit too, down the underside of his jaw and creeping further, and Techno wonders how he missed it before.

Tubbo takes the chair by the monitor, inching it as close to Ranboo’s side as he can get. Techno pulls the second chair to the other side of the bed, and he settles down into it.

Ranboo’s chest rises and falls slowly. His eyelids don’t even so much as flutter.

Across the bed, Tubbo’s hand sneaks out to take Ranboo’s, careful fingers finding their way around the wires connected to his wrist. For a long moment, neither of them speak. The minutes pass slowly by, punctuated by the regular, unfeeling beep of Ranboo’s heartbeat - the *third* one Techno can hear. It’s less overwhelming than he thinks it should be.

Is he supposed to say something? Should he? Does he reach his hand out over the bed to take Tubbo’s in his own, squeeze his fingers and tell him it’s all going to be okay, even if they both know that’s a lie?

“This is all my fault.”

Techno tilts his head to look at Tubbo. “It’s not.”

“It *is*, ” Tubbo repeats, more forcefully. “I’ve known him the longest. I even said—I *knew* there was something wrong this whole time. I knew someone had hurt him, and I was always worried he wasn’t safe. I knew it. This is my fault.”

“We all could have done something,” Techno says. He tries to meet Tubbo’s guilt with reason. “It’s not like Wil or I did anything either.”

Tubbo stares down at his and Ranboo’s interlaced fingers. “That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“It’s—” He cuts off with a frustrated noise. Techno waits. “I knew this would happen, and I didn’t stop it. It’s my fault.”

“That’s not how this works, Tubbo,” Techno tells him. “This is the fault of whoever hurt him. Not yours.”

“I still let it happen,” Tubbo says. He’s close to tears again. Maybe Techno should backpedal this conversation before it gets any worse, before Tubbo breaks down again. “I warned him, you know? Told him nothing good comes out of caring about me. Everyone I love is cursed.”

And that knocks the breath right out of Techno’s lungs. “Tubbo…”

“It’s true,” Tubbo says, and now he raises his free hand to scrub at his eyes. “Quackity says he’s cursed, right? So am I, but mine doesn’t hurt me. It hurts anyone else who gets close to me, and it means I can’t ever hold on to anyone, or else—or else *this* happens.”

Techno aches. He thinks again about reaching over this bed and taking Tubbo’s hand. “You didn’t cause this.”

Tubbo shrugs. He doesn’t look up.

“You didn’t, Tubbo,” Techno says again, and he doesn’t know how he can make Tubbo believe him, but he needs to say it. He’s gone long enough letting his brothers hurt because he just doesn’t know what to say. “You’ve had a lot of fucking awful things happen to you, and it sucks, it sucks *so much* and you didn’t deserve a single piece of it. You didn’t cause it. Nothing you *ever* did made you deserve this or, or be the *cause* of any of it.”

Tubbo lets go of Ranboo’s hands, wraps two shaky arms around his chest. His voice trembles the same way. “Then why does it always happen to me?”

Techno gets up. It catches Tubbo’s attention, makes him look up now as Techno moves around the bed and kneels down beside Tubbo’s chair, eye level with his little brother.

“Because the world sucks,” Techno says. “That’s the only reason why, Tubbo. I promise.”

There are tears still in Tubbo’s eyes. “It doesn’t ever feel like that.”

“I know.” He does—he *gets it*. When you don’t know who to blame, it’s so easy to put it on yourself, because at least then it has somewhere to go. He knows that he’s been carrying

something like that for years. “And it isn’t fair that you’ve been made to feel like that, that you’ve been dealt such a shitty hand in life. But you didn’t do that. It’s *not* because of you.”

Tubbo sniffles. Third time crying tonight, but maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe Tubbo needs to get this out. Techno reaches up his hands to hold on to his little brother's arms, not quite a hug, but something close to comfort. Tubbo leans into it.

“It feels like it is,” Tubbo whispers, but it’s less of an argument this time. “Like—like it’s my fault my mom left because she never even wanted to be a mom, so it’s my fault my dad was never happy, and even if it’s not my fault that Quackity left, it still just—it just feels like I’m not ever gonna be able to keep anyone, I couldn’t even keep Wilbur, and—and then—and then *Tommy*—”

Tubbo’s voice breaks. Techno pulls him in for a hug this time. “It’s not your fault. Tommy leaving wasn’t your fault.”

Tubbo sobs into Techno’s shoulder and Techno holds him close as Tommy’s heart beats in his head. He holds Tubbo close. He wishes that Tubbo could hear the heartbeat; he wishes that he could hear Tommy and know he isn’t gone.

There’s so much Techno aches to tell Tubbo. That he deserved better; that he was a *kid*; that there’s no way he could’ve ever done something to deserve the sort of childhood he had. That Techno so badly wishes he could go back and give him something better. And, more relevant, that it isn’t Tubbo’s fault alone that Tommy had left, and it certainly isn’t his fault that he didn’t come back.

What Techno says, instead, is, “You gotta stop blaming yourself for things that aren’t your fault.”

Tubbo gives a wet attempt at a chuckle into Techno’s shoulder. “I’ll stop when you stop.”

Ouch. “Touché.”

Tubbo leans back in his chair and scrubs at his face. Techno leans back on his heels. “It’s not your fault Tommy’s gone, either. You know that, right?”

Techno studies him. He’s not stupid, so he’s not sure how to answer that without undermining everything he just told Tubbo.

“Tommy’s gone because some asshole took him,” Tubbo says, his voice shaky and uncertain, but it grows a little stronger. “Not because of us.”

And that backs him into a corner of having to agree. “Yeah. You’re right. You’re a smart kid.”

“Don’t patronize me, Techno.” Tubbo gives him a tired smile.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Techno gets to his feet, stretching out his legs starting to ache from the time spent crouching after so long of just sitting. He stays there for a moment longer, stood beside Tubbo’s chair while Ranboo continues to sleep, totally undisturbed.

A heart beats in his chest, and another in his head, and a third from the monitor by Ranboo's bed. In Techno's chest, something tugs him towards the woods.

This hospital is a good forty minute drive from those woods.

Yeah. That's probably not just wanting to go exploring for answers, then.

Techno trades places with Phil a bit later, and he sits down in the waiting room beside his twin. The place is utterly empty save for the two of them, which is unsurprising at what's now nearly four in the morning, he guesses.

"How's Ranboo?" Wilbur asks, rubbing sleep from his eyes as Techno sits.

"Still asleep," Techno says.

Wilbur nods. "And Tubbo?"

Techno turns that one over for a few moments before answering. "He said something a little odd. About you."

Wilbur blinks. He waits for Techno to continue.

"Tubbo thinks he's not allowed to care about people, because if he does, they'll be taken away from him." Techno steals a glance at Wilbur's face. His expression looks tiredly heartbroken. It's the face of someone who's already heard so much tonight that there's not much further to fall. "And he mentioned you specifically."

Wilbur all but curls in on himself. Techno can see the guilt written across his face, plain as day. When he speaks, his voice is quiet and pained. "Why are you telling me this?"

Techno does not stop talking. He's gotten this far, and he's going to push himself this last bit further.

"Because we talked about blaming ourselves for things that aren't our fault, and it made me think about when you left. I was angry with you, and hurt, because you never talked to me about *why*. And after awhile I started blaming myself, because I thought maybe if I'd done better, or tried harder, or *something*, maybe you wouldn't have gone."

"Techno," Wilbur starts shakily, but Techno raises a hand to cut him off.

"Let me finish. Wilbur, I blamed myself and I blamed you because I didn't have anyone else to hold at fault. We were the only two people in that situation, so it felt like it had to be one or the other. But I don't think it's one or the other. It's both of us, at least a little, and it's neither of us too."

Wilbur looks at him, tired sad eyes behind round glasses.

“You hurt me when you left,” Techno says, voice quiet. “But you were hurt when you left too. Right?”

There’s a pause, and then Wilbur takes in a shaky breath. “I don’t think it’s your fault at all.”

“But there were things I could’ve done better anyway. I was always caught up in how *you* hurt *me*. I didn’t... You wouldn’t have just cut us all off like that for no reason. I wish I’d gotten you to talk. I miss when we were close enough to tell everything to.”

Wilbur makes a noise like a strangled sob. Techno looks up now, at his brother’s crumpled face and the hand over his mouth, and he knows he’s hit close enough to the target. He knows he’s right.

“Something happened,” he pushes. “Something happened, and that’s why you left.”

“It doesn’t—it’s nothing you don’t already know about.” Wilbur pulls his glasses off, focused on cleaning them and blinking back tears. “It’s nothing that was worth bringing up, when—when other people were... when Tubbo...”

Techno’s chest aches. “It’s about his dad.”

Wilbur says nothing, and that’s enough answer.

“You could’ve told me,” Techno says quietly. “I mean, I knew you—that you were there, with Quackity. You never wanted to talk about it, and I didn’t know how to bring it up, but you could’ve told me that was why.”

Wilbur shakes his head, and his eyes are somewhere far away. “What’s the point? Everyone already knew. What was I gonna say, oh hey guys, remember how I almost died? How I almost had to watch Quackity’s own father shoot him to death in the woods while he threatened me to carry his corpse? Ha, yeah, that was fucked up!”

Wilbur’s voice breaks on the last of that. His head sinks, hair falling over his face so Techno can’t see it anymore. Wilbur slides his glasses back on.

“You could’ve,” Techno tells him, trying to make his voice as gentle as he can. This is a wound years-old and festering for them both. “I would have listened. I loved you, and I still do. I would’ve done anything to help.”

Wilbur’s shoulders are stiff and still. He doesn’t look up.

“I wanna try again.” Techno turns a little in his chair, fully facing his twin. He sets his hand on the arm rests between them. He lets Wilbur be the one to take it. “I don’t want to blame either of us anymore. I just want to be your brother again.”

There’s another of those barely suppressed sobs. If Wilbur thinks he’s keeping them quiet, Techno has another thing to tell him. His hands are frozen in front of him, not taking Techno’s hands but not pulling away either.



“You were always my brother,” Wilbur says shakily. “You always have been. That never stopped, Tech, you’ve *always* been my brother. I—I—There are just things I *can’t tell you*.”

Techno studies him. “Is it another curse thing? I swear, if you’re gonna tell me you’re cursed too...”

Wilbur laughs, hollow. “No, not that.”

“Then what?” Techno lowers his voice. “I’ll listen, I’ll believe you, I won’t tell anyone else, whatever it is that kept you from telling me before...”

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Wilbur shakes his head. “It’s... god, Techno, I can’t. Maybe someday I can, but I can’t tell you this. Not now. Not here. But it was never you, okay? It was never anything you ever did. I swear.”

For a long, long moment, Techno turns this over. This is what he wanted, somewhat; to know that there was *something* that sent Wilbur away. That it wasn’t him. That Wilbur still cares, even if he’d left.

“Okay,” Techno says finally. “I’ll listen. I’ll listen, if you ever decide to tell.”

Wilbur looks up now, and he gives him the smallest smile. It’s a genuine one, and Techno treasures it as the first he’s gotten in years and years. His twin smiles at him, and it carries no feelings of bitterness and no ache of resentment.

And now Wilbur takes his hand.

“Don’t leave again,” Techno says. He thinks it sounds desperate, a little like begging, but he lets it out anyway. “Stay with us.”

Wilbur squeezes his hand. “Okay.”

And Techno decides to trust him.

“What do we do now?”

The three of them regroup in the waiting when Phil leaves to call someone just outside, something about Ranboo. He’d driven to pick up fast food for the four of them too, so now Tubbo and Wilbur munch fries over theorizing. Techno’s eaten a bit, but there’s something too anxious in his stomach to let him properly eat.

“It seems really unlikely that there’s *multiple* people in the woods with a gun,” Tubbo says. “So what we found with Quackity—that’s gotta be related to this stuff with Ranboo. Right?”

“That sounds right,” Wilbur says. “But we still don’t know who that person would be.”

Techno's head is full of whispers, rumbling around in the back of it like a restless symphony. He paces around while Wilbur and Tubbo talk.

"It has to be the same person who took Tommy." Tubbo leans over to grab a cheeseburger from a paper bag on the coffee table they've commandeered. "Like, someone kidnaps one kid, and then someone tries to kill another two weeks later. That's gotta be connected."

"Then there's everything with Karl and Quackity," Wilbur points out. "And... Techno's whole situation."

Tubbo takes a bite and chews in thoughtful silence for a moment. "I feel like we're just missing one piece. Like... it's all almost there. We just... there's just one thing off. Techno, eat."

Techno absently takes a few fries from the container Tubbo holds out to him. He's only half listening to everything they say, and none of it quite sinks in.

"We don't even have any suspects besides Karl, who we've established was unarmed," Wilbur points out. "How is it all almost there?"

"That's the one thing we're missing," Tubbo says.

Wilbur sighs. "Have you heard from Quackity lately?"

"A few hours ago," Tubbo says. "He's staying with Sapnap again. They still haven't found any trace of Karl. Sapnap wants to report him missing first thing tomorrow morning."

Wilbur hums. There's a beat of silence as the two of them eat. Techno winds his way between two chairs, turns and walks back the other direction. He follows the patterns in the carpet with his eyes and his feet.

"Techno," Wilbur says, breaking into his thoughts. He stops pacing and looks up. "Are you okay?"

Techno blinks, once, twice. The question takes longer than it should to make sense to him. "Yeah. Restless."

Wilbur nods. "Understandable."

For some reason, that response sits uncomfortably in Techno's stomach. He turns it over for a little while longer, trying to figure out why.

Oh.

"Not normal restlessness," he says finally. It's a little hard to put this into words. He gestures to his own head. "It's... *They're* restless. Can't sit still when they're noisy."

Wilbur and Tubbo both stare at him now.

"Is it like what happened earlier?" Wilbur asks. Techno shakes his head.

“No, they’re not... They’re not trying to call for something. I think.” At the same time he says that, he feels something tugging inside of his chest. “Not like they did then or with Quackity, anyway.”

Wilbur doesn’t look satisfied with that answer. Neither does Tubbo.

“Maybe we should start with figuring out what exactly it is that Techno’s hearing,” Wilbur suggests. “Since it seems like he really is connected to—to *something*, if we figure that out, maybe it’ll get us closer to having a suspect.”

“And how are we supposed to figure that out?” Tubbo questions. Wilbur’s turning this over, a frown on his face, but he doesn’t get a chance to speak.

“We go back to the woods,” Techno says. It jumps out of him without him even thinking about it. Tubbo and Wilbur both stare at him again.

“We tried that,” Wilbur says carefully. “It just turns into aimless wandering and we find nothing. It’s too big.”

Techno doesn’t know how to explain this. His chest aches. “I’ll be able to find it this time. We just have to go.”

Tubbo looks between Wilbur and Techno. “Right now?”

“Soon,” Techno says. “I know I can find it now. I don’t know if that’s going to change.”

As he says it, the restless whispering in his head takes a joyful turn. As if they know, as if they can hear what he’s decided. Which makes sense; they’re in *his* head, after all. *You’d better be ready to show me where Tommy is*, he thinks at them, but he doesn’t say any of that out loud. He’s pretty sure both of his brothers would be a little less willing to go through with this if they knew everything the voices told him.

“Maybe we should regroup a little first,” Wilbur says. “Meet back up with Quackity and Sapnap. Extra eyes couldn’t hurt to help look, and extra back-up in case we do run across whoever is out there.”

Techno shrugs. “Sure. If Quackity’s okay going near it, that’s fine.”

Tubbo looks between them again. There’s something unreadable on his face. “Okay. I’ll text Quackity and let him know. Uh... What are we going to tell Phil?”

They’re all quiet at that, trying to come up with a good excuse. He’s probably not going to buy that they’re all just wanting to go home, with not a single one of them staying behind to make sure Ranboo doesn’t wake up alone.

“Maybe you should stay here,” Wilbur suggests carefully, but Tubbo shoots it down instantly.

“No way. If you’re going out there, so am I.”

Wilbur sighs. “Well, we can’t just tell him the truth. So until we come up with a better excuse...”

“Just tell him we’re running home to get some things,” Techno suggests. “Extra clothes for Ranboo and whatever. It’ll buy us at least an hour and a half before he starts wondering why we’re not back.”

It’s the best they can come up with. Wilbur nods. “Okay. We’ll figure out what else to tell him later, then.”

Techno feels the slightest pang of guilt at lying to their father. He also thinks that he should feel *more* guilty than he does, but the feeling is outweighed by everything else. The eagerness humming in his head, the restlessness that whispers there and keeps him on his feet, impatient to go.

They’re ready to show him something. He’s getting what he wants. In all of those dreams, all it had taken to see Tommy was to give them a little bit of himself, to give in and let them have what they wanted, and they’d show him Tommy.

This is not a dream. This is real, and they are showing him something. He thinks - he *hopes* - he knows what it is.

He just doesn’t think about his end of the deal.

## Chapter End Notes

writing techno pov is fun but sad because no sapnap

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

helloooooo dearest readers!! i hope you are all well and do not mind the lack of wednesday update this week - i don't want to rush any of these ending chapters so i have been taking my time on them! there may or may not be any more wednesday updates at all - we'll see how quickly i get through these finale chapters.

hope you enjoy!! as always big thank to readers, commenters, bookmarkers, kudos-leavers, fic recommenders, etc etc. ily guys <33

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I’m sorry,” Quackity says quietly, for what he thinks is about the hundredth time today. And for the hundredth time, Sapnap is gentle and he is patient, and Quackity *knows* he doesn’t deserve this, but it sits so warmly inside of him that he keeps asking for it anyway.

“Isn’t your fault,” Sapnap says. His hand is on the back of Q’s neck, fingers winding through his hair, and Quackity leans into it like a damn cat. They’re on the couch, even though Sapnap should really be in his own bed, but they’ve both pretty much given up on sleep by now. The clock ticks steadily past midnight, past one, later into the night and earlier into the morning. Quackity’s phone is in reach in case Tubbo or Wilbur text him again. He’s not sure what else they’d say; they’ve already texted that they’re on their way back from the hospital and they need to talk now. Tubbo says they’ll explain when they get here. Quackity’s stomach is in knots.

His stomach is in knots, and his head rests on Sapnap’s shoulder.

They’d spent the whole day searching for Karl all over town. Sapnap drove out to the woods too, wanted to find Karl’s car and look even deeper. Quackity felt like he was going to throw up. In the end, he stayed in Sapnap’s car while his friend looked by himself, and Quackity’s head played images of blood spilled on damp leaves and the sound of a gunshot echoing in his ears. In his head, in the emptiness that lives in his chest, his father held the gun, then Wilbur, then Karl, and it hurt so much he couldn’t breathe. He curled up in the back of Sapnap’s car and let himself cry until he wore himself down so far that nothing else would come out.

Sapnap found him in the same place, and without a word, he sat in that backseat beside him. Quackity’s head rested on his lap and neither of them said anything for a long, long time.

“Sorry,” Quackity had finally whispered.

“Not your fault,” Sapnap had said.

Now, with his head on Sapnap's shoulder, his eyes slipping shut, and his mind spun out and worn from... from *everything* today, Quackity wonders if he can believe that. He's heard Sapnap say it enough to bite his tongue and avoid asking for yet another reassurance, but it still sits heavy and ugly somewhere in the void that lives in his chest. Tonight, that void feels so empty and cold that even Sapnap's arms around him don't do much to ease it.

"You feeling okay?" Sapnap murmurs, lightly tapping his fingers on the back of Quackity's neck, down to the base of his shoulders.

Quackity makes a noncommittal noise, somewhere between hum and grumble. "Tired."

"Sleep." There's a gentle pressure on the side of his face, on his forehead just by the bandage still wrapped there. He feels Sapnap's hair whisper against his skin, the warmth of his breath on his cheek. "I'll wake you if something happens."

"Hmm." He doesn't have the presence of mind to do anything but give in to that. He lets himself drift in this quiet, uneasy moment of something that's not quite peace, but is the closest he thinks he's allowed to have of it.

He startles awake from a dreamless sleep what feels like seconds later. Sapnap shifts under him, and Quackity is fuzzily aware of something pounding on the front door.

"Tubbo?" Quackity asks sleepily, and Sapnap makes a tired noise of agreement.

"I'll get the door," he says. He gently pushes Quackity off of him, which is when Quackity realizes that he'd been almost entirely in Sapnap's lap. He's glad Sapnap gets up and leaves, that he isn't here to see the way his face heats up at the realization he'd fallen asleep on him *again*.

This is becoming a habit that Quackity really needs to cut out.

...Eventually.

He sits on the couch and blinks and yawns, trying to shake the cloud of sleep that hangs over him. From the kitchen, he hears the door open and the subdued sound of tired voices.

At least he won't be the only one struggling to keep awake, he thinks.

Tubbo steps into the living room first, followed closely by Wilbur, who gives Quackity a tired smile when they make eye contact.

"Hi," Wil says. "Sorry for keeping you up at this hour."

Quackity shrugs it off. "Don't worry about it. We weren't sleeping much anyway. How's Ranboo?"

"Still in critical condition." Tubbo plops himself down on the couch beside Quackity. He looks tired, overgrown hair still not quite long enough to hide the way his eyes look a little

lifeless and sunken. It twists in Quackity's stomach, some deep ingrained instinct yelling at him to make sure the kid's okay. "They said he's gonna be fine, though."

"That's good," Quackity says, and then rushes to correct himself. "That he's gonna be fine, I mean. Not—Not the first part."

"I know what you meant," Tubbo says.

Sapnap pokes his head through the doorway. "You guys want coffee? I'm putting on a pot."

"Yes please," Wilbur says, and Quackity echoes the statement. If they're gonna be talking about anything remotely important, Quackity *definitely* needs the mental fortification of caffeine to get through it. Or else he's gonna go right back to sleep here on the couch beside Tubbo.

Techno joins them in the living room a few moments later, cross-legged on the floor beside Wilbur. Wilbur looks over his twin as he sits down, an unspoken question in his gaze, and Quackity has a moment to idly wonder what it is. For now, it hangs over them unanswered.

Sapnap brings coffee for everyone. Even Tubbo grabs a cup of his own, spooning far too much sugar into it while Sapnap teases him.

"Risking stunting your growth with that?" Sapnap says. "Even more than it already is?"

"Oh, fuck off," Tubbo says without a hint of venom. "I'm barely shorter than you are."

"Don't worry, that doesn't mean much," Quackity joins in. "Sapnap's tiny."

Sapnap makes an offended noise. "Taller than you!"

"You're all short," Techno interrupts. "There, solved. Can we get on to the serious stuff now?"

Quackity folds his legs under him on the couch. He sips at the coffee in his hands, nose wrinkled at both the temperature and the taste. Sapnap's still shit at making coffee.

"That's a good idea," Sapnap says after a moment of solemn silence follows Techno's words. "Can we start off with an explanation of what exactly the fuck is going on? Because I'm gonna be honest, I am *incredibly lost*."

Another moment of silence. It's as if they're all wordlessly nudging one another to be the one to speak up and explain. Nobody even knows where to start. Quackity's still trying to figure it all out himself.

"I think Techno should explain," Tubbo says finally.

Techno sighs and sets his mug down, face twisting in something like resigned acceptance. "Fine. You gotta jump in if I stop makin' sense though, everything's... It's all a bit jumbled up right now." He gestures to his head as he talks, spinning his hand in a gesture that says something Quackity can't quite pin down.

“We’re all sleep deprived, don’t worry,” Sapnap tells him, unbothered. Techno snorts something close to a laugh in response.

“Oh, this isn’t sleep deprivation.” He looks up and meets Sapnap’s eyes, and then Quackity’s too. Even without another word, the look makes something freeze inside of Quackity. Something’s wrong. “This is gonna sound pretty fucking unbelievable, just so you know. I’m not making any of it up, though.”

“Karl tried to murder me this weekend,” Quackity says flatly. “Try me.”

Techno nods. “It’s related to that, actually. I’ve, uh. I’ve been hearing these voices for… a week? Maybe a bit longer. Somewhere around there. Started off having these dreams about Tommy, saw him standing on the street outside our house, and then another time he was… some other place, dark and crowded. Saw him all covered in blood, and it kept feeling like he was somewhere really close by, I just couldn’t figure out *where*. This was before we found his hoodie, too. I had no way of knowing there was blood on it beforehand.”

Quackity’s mind spins. He takes another sip of his coffee as he tries to process that.

“Okay,” Sapnap says slowly. He says it again. “Okay. And that is related to Karl and Quackity because…”

“Heard ‘em again on Sunday afternoon,” Techno says. “They just freaked out, totally out of nowhere, started screaming and wanting something real bad, and I couldn’t figure out what it was.”

“*Who* it was,” Tubbo chimes in. “I was there. He kept repeating ‘they want him’ under his breath, over and over.”

“That,” Techno agrees. “Found out later that happened the exact same time you were in the woods with Karl.”

That knocks the breath out of him. Quackity stares. “Are you sure?”

“Started maybe twenty, thirty minutes before Wilbur texted us to come home,” Techno says. “That add up for you?”

Fuck. “Yeah. Exactly.”

Techno looks wholly unsurprised. “Right. So Karl’s out there telling you that—that *something’s* been waiting for you, and at the same time, I’m hearing these voices telling me the same exact shit. Feels like a little more than a coincidence to me.”

“Hold up,” Sapnap says. “Karl said *what*?”

Quackity winces. “Forgot to mention that part.”

Sapnap sets his coffee down, scrubs at his face with both hands. “Holy fuck. Explain. Now.”



So now it's his turn to talk, he guesses. A sick, anxious feeling settles into his stomach, memories turned sour in his head. His hands are shaking. "Uh. Um. You remember when—when... uh, my dad. Back... when I left. When he... yeah. Uh. That stuff."

"Yeah," Sapnap says. "Of course I remember that."

"I've... I've kind of thought," Quackity says, and *shit*, why is this so hard to put into words? "I've kind of been feeling that I... Like, I'm cursed or something because of that? Was supposed to die there, so I just... Dunno. Something's chasing me down to make sure I go back and do it right."

Sapnap stares at him. When he speaks, it leaves his mouth so sad and soft that Quackity wants to hide. "Q. You could've told me sooner."

"It sounds like it's just me being fucking traumatized, though," Quackity says. "But I don't think that's it. Or at least, not all of it. Because Karl—he knew. I didn't tell him, I didn't tell *anyone*, but he knew, and the way he talked—it's like he was the one who was supposed to make sure it happened. Told me I'd been running enough and it was time to let go."

Silence meets that, heavy and overwhelming. Quackity feels like his entire body is shaking. A hand rests on his, fingers wrapped around his own, and he glances down to see it belongs to Tubbo. He takes a shaky breath, gives a grateful squeeze.

"Shit," Sapnap says.

"Yeah," Techno agrees. "I'm like, ninety percent sure it's all connected. Whatever I'm hearing, whatever's going on with Karl, Tommy going missing. It's all the same thing."

"You think Karl kidnapped Tommy?" Sapnap asks. "That doesn't sound like him."

"Neither does him trying to kill Quackity," Wilbur points out. "But no. It doesn't sound like him. He's not our main suspect."

"Then who is?" Sapnap asks. "Besides... the voices, or whatever it is that Techno's hearing."

Nobody answers that one, all glancing at one another. Quackity withdraws his hand from Tubbo's reaching for his coffee again. Watery and burnt or not, the caffeine is at least nice.

"That's the thing," Tubbo says. "We, uh. We don't really have one."

"We have a way to figure it out, though," Techno adds. "They're really... persistent tonight. I think they're waiting for someone. If we go out there and track them down, we'll be able to figure out who that is."

Sapnap raises both eyebrows. "So you're gonna go traipsing through the woods to find whatever creepy entity is talking to you in your head, possessed my boyfriend, and kidnapped your little brother, and then just... figure it out as you go?"

Techno shrugs. "I mean, that was the plan, yeah."

Sapnap looks unimpressed.

“So you have no plan,” Sapnap says. “No idea what you’re going to find out there, no suspects, no—just, no plan whatsoever. You realize how dangerous that is?”

Techno doesn’t even bother to look ashamed about it. “I have a knife.”

“That’s...” Sapnap sighs and scrubs his face again. “Jesus. This is a terrible idea.”

“It’s our only idea,” Tubbo says.

“They’re not gonna wait around forever,” Techno says. “The longer we do nothing, the likelier it is that someone else is gonna get hurt.”

Sapnap gestures with his hands. “But by *who*? You still don’t even have a single suspect, and —”

“Fine,” Techno bites out abruptly. “You wanna hear it? I’ll say it. The most suspicious person around here is your dad.”

Sapnap raises his eyebrows again. Even Wilbur gives him an odd look. “Really? Come on, Techno.”

“I’m serious,” Techno says. “He’s everywhere he’s not supposed to be, he’s almost as overbearing as *my* dad is—”

“That’s literally just how he always is,” Sapnap says. Techno ignores him.

“The night we all were out looking for Karl, he’s the one who found us. How’d he know we’d be so deep in the woods? Nobody knew we were there.”

Quackity sees what he’s getting at now. He frowns. “He said your dad told him.”

“We were only out there for a few hours,” Wilbur says, slowly. “Techno has a point. How *did* he know where we were?”

Sapnap looks between all of them incredulously. “Are you guys serious? You’re talking about *my dad*. Have we just, like, completely forgotten what kind of a person he is? He cried my first day of school because he was worried something would happen while he wasn’t there. And then he did the same thing every single year of elementary school.”

Quackity wants to side with Sapnap. He spent most of his childhood and nearly all of his teen years quietly wishing Bad was *his* father, despite all the flaws Sapnap could find to pick out. This doesn’t line up at all.

“Sapnap’s right,” Quackity speaks up. “Just because he managed to find us quickly one night doesn’t mean we should jump right to—what, he kidnapped Tommy? Is that what you’re getting after?”

There's a sudden loud noise at Quackity's side. He startles before catching himself, nearly jumping off the couch in surprise.

"Holy shit," he breathes, and he turns to Tubbo. "Are you—"

And then his voice dies in his throat at the look on Tubbo's face. He'd slammed his coffee mug down on the table abruptly, and now he's staring at Quackity with his face gone entirely pale.

"Bad was out the night Tommy went missing," Tubbo says. He looks like he doesn't even realize how much he'd startled Quackity. "I saw his car on Connor's footage."

Wilbur stares at him now. "You said he had an explanation for that."

"He did," Tubbo said, and now he scrambles to grab his backpack, digging through it frantically. "He said he was out doing a late night grocery run or something stupid as hell like that. Who gets groceries at 10 PM?"

"Some people do," Sapnap says defensively.

Tubbo ignores him. He pulls a thumb drive from his backpack. "I need somewhere to watch this. Now."

The five of them gather around Sapnap's shitty little desktop computer while Tubbo plugs in the flash drive and pulls up the only file on it, a blurry video of a darkened street. Quackity recognizes it.

"I find it hard to believe you haven't already been through every relevant bit of this footage," Sapnap says.

"I thought I did," Tubbo says. He starts skipping ahead through the video. "But now I think I missed something. Look, here's your dad's car driving by."

Sapnap's quiet. "So that just proves what he says, right? He was out and he got home late."

Tubbo makes a noise that's not quite an answer. He skips through the video rapidly, and then he skips entire hours ahead.

"Uh, Tubbo," Techno says, sounding as confused as Quackity feels. "Why are we looking at this part of the video? Tommy's—Tommy's long gone by then. At this point, you and I were already out looking."

"Was Bad's car in his driveway when we left?" Tubbo asks instead of answering. Techno blinks.

"I... don't remember," he says. "I didn't look."

Tubbo focuses on the screen without another word. Something cold crawls through Quackity's skin and settles itself in his empty chest.

"Phil called Bad," Tubbo says, quietly. "While you were in the woods, Techno. Dad called him and it went straight to voicemail. Didn't even ring."

There isn't service when you get far enough out in the woods. Quackity curls his fingers, trying to fight the shaking unease weighing in them.

Sapnap says, "His phone was probably turned off. It was late."

"Is your dad the kind of person who turns his phone off overnight? Doesn't leave the ringer on all night *just* in case someone needs him?" Tubbo says. His eyes don't move from the screen, but his tone is enough to carry the weight of a pointed look without turning his gaze.

Sapnap's silence is as good as an admission.

"There," Wilbur blurts out suddenly, and in the same moment Tubbo's hands fly over the keyboard to pause the video. Quackity leans over Tubbo's shoulder to see the screen better.

The timestamp in the lower corner displays a little after three in the morning, and in the center of the screen, blurry and dark, is a car that Quackity wishes he didn't recognize.

"Holy fuck," Quackity breathes.

There's a long moment of silence, like all of this is sinking in for all of them. It feels numb and cold and deeply unsettling. It weighs too heavily in his hands.

"This is fucked up," Sapnap says, and he sounds panicked. "This—This is a coincidence. It doesn't mean—why would... That's *my dad!*"

Quackity's stomach twists. "Maybe it's not like that. Obviously... I mean, something's going on with Karl, so maybe your dad's just... A little bit not himself now either."

Sapnap's eyes flash with something Quackity has to remind himself isn't anger, or at least, isn't directed at him. "He's literally acted the exact same every time I've talked to him recently. There's... with Karl, at least I *knew* something was going on. This..."

"He fucking lied to me," Tubbo says. "He fucking looked me in the eye and told me—Jesus Christ. I can't believe him."

"You don't know that," Sapnap says, like he's desperately holding on to one last hope. "This could still be a misunderstanding, some sort of coincidence..."

Quackity's chest aches. Before he can think better of it, he reaches out a hand to clutch Sapnap's fingers in his own. He doesn't react at all for a moment, and then he grabs on tightly, as if now Quackity's hand is the lifeline to cling to.

"One way to figure it out," Techno says. He straightens up. "They're still waiting."

And when he says that, Quackity thinks he can feel it too. Something tugging gently in his chest, at his hands; a feeling he's been trying to put off for so long, now put into words and a hundred times stronger for it. He's tired, and this thing knows it. He's been running for so long, and this thing is ready for him to lie down and rest.

Sapnap looks like he's lost. He looks like everything's been kicked out from under him, and it's a look that Quackity doesn't like on him. Sapnap always seems so sure of himself, of everything, and this... This is wrong on him.

"Fine," Sapnap says finally. "We're driving past his house first. If his car's there, you're all wrong and we come right back here and think of a new plan."

"Deal," Techno says. "Let's go."

Outside, there's a momentary scuffle over keys. Wilbur tries to snatch them out of Techno's hands, a defense on his tongue, "You're not driving while that thing is in your head. I don't trust it."

"I am completely in control of myself," Techno says, annoyance snapping out of his mouth. He holds the keys away from Wilbur. "It's my car."

"We're taking mine," Sapnap interrupts before the argument can escalate any further. "I'm driving. And Quackity gets the front seat."

He silently dares anyone to argue, a stern glare boring into each and every one of them. Nobody says a word in protest.

"Why me?" Quackity asks quietly as he closes the passenger side door. Sapnap starts the car.

"Because I like you best," Sapnap says, and he says it loud enough for the rest of the car to hear. Quackity thinks on any other day, someone would have risen to the bait. Tonight, there is only silence to meet it.

The silence bleeds into darkness, and the darkness creeps into the hollow in Quackity's chest and curls up there like an uneasy fog. The world is cold and quiet and dark. Streetlights pass outside, the electric glow the only thing lighting this tiny town so late at night. Windows are dark and so is the sky, the same heavy clouds still gathering stubbornly between Quackity's eyes and the stars and moon. The streets are deserted save for them.

It's four in the morning. It is dark, it is quiet, and the hole in Quackity's chest calls so insistently that he can't ignore it at all.

Bad's car isn't in his driveway.

He thinks, when they see it, that nobody is surprised. Even when Sapnap's knuckles tighten and turn white on the steering wheel, even when he mutters under his breath, "This doesn't

mean you're right."

Even then, it still hangs over them like an expected weight.

"But it does mean we're going," Techno says. He sounds a bit too eager. "That was the deal."

Conflict rages across Sapnap's expression. He looks from the empty driveway and his father's darkened windows to the woods just barely visible in the distance, to Quackity's own face. As if he's looking for permission, or maybe the opposite; begging for a reason to turn the car around and go back home.

For some reason, Quackity can't give that to him. He shrugs. "Techno's right."

"If you want to go back," Sapnap starts to say quietly, but Quackity just shakes his head.

"I'm okay. I want to do this."

And he thinks, somewhere inside of him, that it's true.

They're all quiet when Sapnap turns onto the road that turns to gravel and winds between trees, deeper and deeper into the woods. It's after a couple minutes that Sapnap breaks the silence again.

"Where exactly are we going?"

"Farther than this," Techno says. "I'll tell you when to stop."

Quackity wonders if he knows where he's going, or if he just feels that same tugging inside of him and is using that to guide him. Quackity wonders if he closes his eyes and focuses on it, if he'd be able to do the same.

Sapnap drives, and then he drives further, and Techno doesn't stop him.

"We should text Dad before we're too far out," Wilbur says quietly from the back seat. There's a rumble of agreement from his brothers. Quackity doesn't know what they end up sending him.

They keep driving. They pass the point where server cuts out, and then they keep going. They're well past where Karl had taken him; they keep going, and they're well past where Bad had found them. They never cross Bad's car, though, which does strike Quackity as a bit odd. Techno looks out the window with a vacant expression on his face.

"Are we almost there?" Sapnap asks. "If we go a whole lot further, we're gonna hit the other side of the forest."

Techno makes a sound of something that could be agreement. That's the only sign he gives that he heard Sapnap at all, still focused on some point out the window.

Wilbur pokes him in the arm. Techno spares him one glance and then looks back out the window.

“We’re almost there,” he says, but his voice comes out vague and disinterested. “I think it’s...”

He trails off. His eyes go unfocused. Sapnap slows the car.

Everyone waits.

“Oh,” Techno says. “Stop.”

Sapnap parks the car there in the middle of the trail, not bothering to find somewhere clear enough to pull off of it. Techno’s out of the car in seconds, and his brothers pile out after him.

When Quackity reaches for his own door, a hand on his shoulder freezes him in place.

“Hold on,” Sapnap says. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

Quackity just looks back at him, and his mind spins uselessly to come up with something to say. “Do I get a choice?”

Wrong thing to say. Sapnap’s eyes go sad. “Of course you do.”

“I mean,” Quackity says, trying to backtrack, “Karl’s—if Karl’s out there, or if Tommy is, that’s more important. More important than me being a little nervous. Let’s—Let’s just focus on Karl now.”

“Q,” Sapnap says. “Obviously I want to find Karl. Of course I’m worried about him, but I can worry about you too at the same time.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.” Quackity’s face feels far too warm against the cold air already seeping into the parked car.

“I’m gonna anyway,” Sapnap says. “If you want to go back, at literally any point, I’ll take you home. No questions asked.”

Quackity really doesn’t think that’s how this works. This moment feels a little more like a point of no return, like the second that he pulls the handle of the car door, he’s going to be thrown into something he’ll never leave. And he doesn’t know where it’s coming from—if it’s the anxiety that rolls off of Sapnap’s shoulders, or the distant, focused look in Techno’s eye, or the empty ache in his chest that feels so resolutely insistent. All of the above, maybe.

He feels a little like this is what he’s been putting off for years. He feels a little like he’s opening this door is the same as opening his arms and letting it in.

But Sapnap reaches across the car now, and he takes Quackity’s hand in his. Sapnap’s eyes are focused on his own, and Quackity can’t look away.

“I mean it,” Sapnap says. “The—all the things you said earlier. It’s not true, you know? I want you to know that. I knew you didn’t like the woods and that all made sense even without—without everything else—”

“We don’t have to talk about this,” Quackity says. “Not now.”

“I want you to understand.” Sapnap’s hand stays on his. “Nobody’s going to hurt you out here. Not while I’m around. I’m bringing you home safe.”

The air in the car grows colder, but Quackity can’t quite feel it. There’s that fluttering in his chest and it feels *warm*, and his face does too, and Sapnap’s hand is still holding his.

The others are waiting for them, but right now, Quackity wants to live in this moment forever and ever. He wants Sapnap’s hand to stay right where it is, he wants *both of them* to stay right here. Even in the woods, here they are in their own little bubble, safe in this car, safe while his hand is held in Sapnap’s.

“Sap,” he says quietly. “I…”

“I love you,” Sapnap blurts out. The warmth in his chest curls a little tighter, and a little sadder too, because this is not news to him. The words fall so close to the flutter in his chest and so far from it at the same time.

“I love you too,” Quackity says, as easily as anything he’s ever said. “You—”

And Sapnap’s lips are on his own.

Time stops right then and there. This moment he is in goes on forever and ever, and it stops as soon as it ends. It’s an eternity caught in a single second and Quackity lives his whole life there in the middle of it. It’s clumsy and it’s rushed, and their noses are pressed against one another in a way that he wants to laugh at, but that would mean moving back so he doesn’t. His hand is in Sapnap’s, and his other hand moves as if it’s pulled by some unseen force and it’s on the side of Sapnap’s face, holding him as if he’s afraid he’ll disappear otherwise. Sapnap smells like familiar body spray and greasy fries. He feels like scratchy stubble under Quackity’s fingers and against his chin, and Quackity hears the beat of his own heart loud in his ears.

He lives there forever. He holds that moment and it holds him.

And then the eternity is over, and it shatters with realization. Quackity jerks back. The air in the car is cold. Sapnap’s hand lets go of his.

His heart still beats a little too loud, though.

“What,” Quackity struggles out.

Something passes across Sapnap’s eyes—regret, he thinks. It stings doubly in Quackity’s heart. “Sorry,” he says, a little out of breath too. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“No,” Quackity says, but that doesn’t make sense, so he tries again. “That’s— *Why?*”



“I love you,” Sapnap says, easily, simply, honestly. Quackity’s breath won’t come back. “Kept trying to tell you. I’m bad with words.”

Oh.

“Oh.” —And aloud, and again— “Oh.”

Everyone is waiting for them. His face feels warmer than ever, but when he looks through the windshield, no one looks back. Wilbur and Tubbo stand beside one another, backs to the car. Techno looks into the woods with his head tipped slightly upwards, frozen utterly still in place.

“Karl knows,” Sapnap offers, and he sounds—he sounds quiet and almost embarrassed. “Just... in case that wasn’t clear. I mean, we didn’t... Haven’t talked about it *recently*. But he knew before.”

“He...” Quackity turns back to look at him, and his mind spins trying to process that. “*Before?*”

“It’s been awhile,” Sapnap admits. His face is red, and his words pick up pace, nearly tripping over each other on their way out of his mouth. “I, uh. It’s been something I thought about for... Fuck, this was bad timing, I shouldn’t have done that. You don’t have to say anything, we can just go and forget that—that it ever happened.”

“I don’t want to,” Quackity says even before his mind has fully caught up. “Forget about it, I mean.”

“Oh,” Sapnap says. “Okay. That’s—That’s good, then.”

Quackity needs to compartmentalise this. Sapnap is right. He loves him, Quackity loves him *very* much, but this is a terrible time to have this revelation. “Let’s talk about this later. *After* you bring me home safe.”

Sapnap gives him a smile, and it looks uncharacteristically shy. It looks like the ones he gave Karl when they’d first started dating. It sends something through his chest that—No. He’s compartmentalising. He’ll think about that later.

“Okay,” Sapnap says. “Deal.”

He opens the car door. Maybe he’ll make it back from this after all.

“Took you fucking long enough,” Tubbo mutters as Quackity walks over. “Gonna stop the pining now?”

Wilbur shoots him a shit-eating grin too. Quackity doesn’t know which one of them he wants to push into the dirt and leaves more. He’d probably go for Tubbo. His brother’s smaller, even if he’s probably strong enough to lift Quackity straight off the ground.

He doesn't push either of them and he folds his arms over his chest instead.

"Shut the fuck up." His face burns even while his breath hangs in clouds in the air.

Techno sets off into the woods at an abruptly brisk pace. The rest of them follow after him, struggling to keep up. Well, all of them but Wilbur. Damn his long legs.

Sapnap slips his hand into Quackity's while they walk. The motion flutters warm in his chest. Tubbo makes an eye-rolling, fake-gagging gesture and sound. Quackity flips him off. That feels warm too.

"How far is it?" Wilbur asks, catching up to his twin's side.

Techno barely spares him a glance, focused on something between the trees that none of them can see, or hear, or whatever it is that Techno's experiencing.

"Do you remember," Techno says, "when we were kids and we came out this way?"

Quackity frowns. Something still tugs at his chest, but he thinks Techno must be able to feel it stronger than he can. He still has no idea which way to even go, besides a general tug *down*.

"No," Wilbur says. "We never came out this far."

"Not from this direction," Techno says.

There's another beat of silence. Quackity waits to let Wilbur be the one to inform Techno he's not making any sense.

"From... what direction?" Wilbur asks carefully.

Techno gestures vaguely into the trees. "That way. The other side."

Well, that's ominous. He asks, "Where are you talking about, Techno? Do you know where we're going now?"

"I think so," he says. "We've been there before."

"All of us?" Sapnap asks. Techno nods.

There's nothing out this way. If they keep walking, in an hour or so they'll hit the highway leading out to—

Wait.

It clicks in his head. It clicks into place in his chest, and it tugs his feet ahead at a faster pace too. "Holy shit."

Techno glances back. He makes eye contact with Quackity, and he knows he's right.

“What is it?” Tubbo asks, impatient, insistent.

“He means the mines,” Quackity says. “He’s talking about the mines.”

The only sound is the crunch of leaves and twigs as Techno forges ahead, an unstoppable force intent on leaving them all behind if they don’t keep up.

Wilbur’s face has gone pale. “Holy shit.”

In Quackity’s chest, the thing that took root there a long time ago blooms. It fills him, fills his lungs, fills every ache, and he should find it hard to breathe but he doesn’t. In his hands, in his feet, it weighs in him and pulls at him, and his footsteps fall into place just behind Techno.

The thing that keeps him grounded are Sapnap’s fingers still wound tightly between his own. He holds on to them. Neither of them let go.

Ahead of them, the trees begin to thin. There’s a steep downwards slope, and below it, Wilbur’s flashlight reflects off of something, and Quackity recognizes it at the same moment that Sapnap’s hand goes stiff and tight in his.

The group of them stand atop this hill, and under his feet, something reaches up to grab inside of his chest and *pull*.

“Fuck,” Sapnap whispers.

Bad’s car is parked here. And at the base of this slope, under this hill supported by old wooden pillars and overhanging boulders, there’s the entrance to an abandoned mine, once boarded off and broken into years ago by a bunch of teenagers looking for something to do.

Quackity has the thought to wonder how close the bunch of them were to uncovering something awful then. He wonders if this—if this *thing* was there before. He wonders how there was ever a time he couldn’t feel it.

“This is it,” Techno says.

## Chapter End Notes

mine theory truthers how we feeling :D

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

There is a heart beating in Techno's head. There is something tugging at him below his feet.

His little brother is close enough that Techno could reach out and hold him. His little brother is here.

*Here, here, here,* the voices whisper. And Tommy's voice is one of them.

## Chapter Notes

HI GUYS I WENT TO AN OLD COAL MINE TODAY IT WAS VERY COOL!! :D i also got mcdonalds chicken nuggets. i was going to leave them in the mines (for the corduroy homeschooler) but that felt like littering so i did not, but in spirit i gave the coal mines a mcnugget offering.

ANYWAY. SO. FIRST THINGS FIRST: yuker drew some A M A Z I N G art for the fic!! check it out here on tumblr:

<https://yuker.tumblr.com/post/663151552479051776/art-for-the-fic-devil-town-a-fic-i-highly>

or here on twitter: <https://twitter.com/mrghostbone/status/1441149951317184514?s=21> and everyone who found the fic because of that art - hello!! welcome! i'm very glad to see you here and hope you enjoy the last leg of the story :D

thank you so so SO much for absolutely blowing me away with the support this past week. i'm still trying to keep up with replying to everyone's comments, but it's starting to become a little difficult - please forgive me for slow replies and trust that i love and appreciate every single piece of feedback that i get, no matter when i reply to it. you guys are absolutely phenomenal and i could not have had the motivation to write this story so quickly without every one of you.

so. with all that being said: on to the chapter. enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Far below the ground he stands on, there is something that whispers and aches.

They have been here a very, very long time. They have been here as long as there has been anyone to stand upon rocky soil and amidst the trees that struggle to grow in it, and to know,

somehow, somewhere in them, that this land is wrong.

Maybe, once, they were only one. Maybe, a long, long time ago, there was a seed of pain buried deep underground, a single tragedy so devastatingly alone that its echoes were felt - silently, wordlessly, achingly - for an existence longer than itself.

Misery loves company, as they say, and this - this is companionship like none other. This is heartbreak and grief and desolation, and the cling of desperate souls begging for solace. This is a sorrow so deep it has grown claws and now it holds on with them, gouging out a place for itself to stay. It is itself, and then it is more than itself, and in this broken land of pain and misery, the sorrow gives itself a voice.

It is more than itself, and they grow. Sorrow finds no comfort in those they claw down, in the ones they reach for and wrap around and draw gently, lovingly, into the ache of grief, but what they do find is a hunger in the emptiness that sorrow leaves behind.

Misery loves company, and grief is set to an endless cycle.

“Everyone stick together,” Wilbur says. It’s a needless warning, Techno thinks, because none of the four standing behind him look entirely interested in running off on their own. Several of them look like they’d rather be anywhere but here at all, actually.

Quackity’s face is pale in the illumination of his flashlight. He holds Sapnap’s hand with a death grip, and something’s distant in his eyes in a way Techno understands like the emptiness that aches in his chest.

Tubbo stands between Quackity and Wilbur, and he’s the rare one of them who looks a little like he might dash in if they don’t pick up the pace already. Techno doesn’t blame him. His own hands and feet itch and tug at him. Urgency presses at his limbs and his chest and whispers in his head, audible words sneaking into his consciousness every now and then.

*Hurry, someone is saying. Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

It beats in Techno’s head in rhythm to the heartbeat there. It’s an echo, reverberating on the inside of his skull with voices overlapped and rushed, and he wishes they’d shut it a little.

“You’re not making this any quicker,” he mutters.

“What?” Wilbur’s looking at him.

Techno focuses on the ground under his feet and the cold air that bites at his hands and the dark tunnel in front of them, minecart tracks leading ahead until they disappear into the darkness. He remembers where he is and he stays there.

“Wasn’t talking to you,” Techno says. A flicker of recognition, and one of resigned worry, crosses over his twin’s eyes.

“Can we get moving?” Tubbo asks, impatience flooding his voice. “We’re here. Bad’s in there. Let’s go.”

“Everyone stick together,” Wilbur says again. “Don’t rush ahead, stay with everyone. We don’t know where exactly to look—”

Techno’s already walking into the mine, Tubbo right on his heels.

It’s dark in here, and Techno knows the further they go, it’ll turn pure black save for the flashlights Wilbur and Quackity carry. It’s eerily quiet too. Techno can hear footsteps behind him; he can hear quiet breathing hanging in the air; he can hear a heartbeat and insistent whispers.

He can’t hear much else besides that.

They walk in silence - or something close to it - for a few minutes longer. On the wall, Wilbur’s flashlight lingers for just a second on graffiti painted on rock, and on broken bottles and crumpled cans left to litter on the floor. These were not left behind by them. Other teenagers have been here, Techno thinks, and he idly wonders if all of them left.

Four years ago, Wilbur made them clean up everything they’d brought in with them, and some of the other garbage too.

“Clean it up,” he’d said. “This place isn’t ours to deface.”

“This isn’t *anyone’s* anymore,” Sapnap had said back then, but he’d picked up an empty beer can anyway.

He wonders now if, four years before, any of them could feel that there was something off in that statement. That something wasn’t right about it, even back then. He wonders if somehow they knew even then that something was here that wasn’t them, because four years ago, Wilbur, who never has been one for following rules, just said again, “Clean it up.”

This is the farthest any of them have been in this mine.

The signs of others have dropped away too; the graffiti stops and the rocky walls are only colored with rust and residue stains, litter dwindles and changes from beer cans and glass bottles to rotting gloves and discarded equipment from decades ago, so rusted and bent out of shape it’s impossible to tell what they used to be. This deep in the mine, it feels like they’ve walked into a time locked in a freezer and preserved and forgotten.

Ahead of them, Wilbur’s light rests on a huge cage of metal and machinery. The old minecart tracks they’ve been following deeper into the mine lead right to it.

“That’s an elevator,” Wilbur says. “There’s three levels to this mine, about two hundred feet down a piece, and that’s how the miners would get coal cars to them. There’s a—”

“Fascinating, Wilbur,” Sapnap interrupts. “Does it still work?”

Wilbur raises an eyebrow. “No. This mine hasn’t had electricity connected to it in decades. And even if it did, *I* sure don’t want to risk a six hundred foot drop in the hands of a mining elevator built in the 1930s.”

“We need to go down,” Techno says. He stands in front of the elevator and peers downward, into the darkness he can see through the cracks in the machinery. He can’t see what’s below it, but the darkness is pooling in his chest and tugging him towards it anyway.

Wilbur shifts from foot to foot. “There’s other ways down.”

“Then lead the way, o coal mine expert,” Techno says, taking a step back and gesturing ahead of him.

This time, Wilbur takes the lead. Techno follows behind him, across the tunnel of the mine, to a darkened crevice he hadn’t noticed on the way in.

“At one point, the miners would use mules to transport coal,” Wilbur says. He flashes his light down a long, narrow hallway that tilts downward at a sharp angle. “Couldn’t just take them on an elevator, obviously, and back before the elevator was even installed they’d need a way to get people and animals down to the lower levels, so they had these paths that you’d walk the mules down—”

“Wilbur,” Tubbo interrupts. “Is this relevant?”

Wilbur opens and closes his mouth. He holds his flashlight out to Techno, some sort of acknowledgement that Techno is the leader here. Or at least that Techno is the one who knows where he’s going.

“Sorry. Uh, mule paths. These go down to the lower levels. It’s steep, so watch your step.”

Techno goes first, accepting the flashlight offered by Wilbur. He feels his brother close behind him, and by the sound of footsteps over his shoulder, he knows everyone else is following, single file.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry*, whispers in his head and tugs in his limbs.

It is... *incredibly* tight.

Rock brushes against both his shoulders when he faces straight forward, and he ends up angling himself slightly to get through a few particularly narrow areas. The ceiling above is close to his head, and if he glances back, he can see Wilbur hunched forward to keep his head clear of it.

It’s a long and steep descent. The floor is damp and slippery in some places. Techno mutters out a warning whenever he comes across a patch, Wilbur passing the warning back for everyone to heed. When they finally reach the wall ahead, there’s a sharp turn, and another tunnel leading downwards and right back in the opposite direction, and it’s a *second* precarious descent down that one too.

And then they're all five stepping out into a wider mineshaft here on the second level. The elevator is to their side again, and Techno takes a moment to swing his flashlight, taking in whatever he can see. Which isn't much different than the first floor.

What he *feels*, though - what he feels is the same and different all at once. What he feels is the heart in his head and the one in his chest equally pounding and tugging at him. They're still pulling him down, and now the voices are louder and more insistent and - and gentler at the same time.

*Here, here, here*, they say, a hundred voices, a single plea. *Nearly there. Hurry.*

"Do we search this level?" Sapnap asks. He's taken the flashlight Quackity had been holding, though they're both still holding hands. Techno doesn't comment on it. They have much more pressing things to deal with right now than whatever years-long pining these two have decided to sort out tonight.

"No," Techno says. "They're further down. Wil?"

Wilbur looks up questioningly.

"You've got another one of those mule paths?"

Wilbur gestures to an opening in the wall, right by the one they'd all just come through. "Here."

He steps through without another word. After only a moment of hesitation, he hears everyone else file in after him.

They walk in silence for a few minutes, and then Wilbur breaks it. "Are you okay?"

Techno shrugs. Kind of an odd question to ask given the circumstances.

"I mean," Wilbur says, voice low enough to at least try to prevent anyone behind them from hearing, "with the voices. What are they saying?"

"They're impatient," Techno says. "They want us to hurry up."

Wilbur's footsteps falter for only a moment. "They know we're coming."

"Yeah." Techno looks ahead. He doesn't look back at his brother. "Kinda hard to keep that from them, considering they're, you know. In my head."

There's quiet in response to that. And then, softly, "Are you sure we should be here, then?"

"You wanna turn around?" Techno asks, rhetorical and flat. "We're here for Tommy. He's here. I'm not leaving without him."

Wilbur's hand holds on to the back of Techno's sleeve. Doesn't stop him, just holds. "I thought we were here for answers. From Bad."



“They’re pretty damn close to being the same thing,” Techno says.

For a moment, he can nearly hear the way Wilbur’s mind turns in the silence that follows. Techno can feel the unease that’s radiating from his twin, but instead of answering, he stops in place. Techno’s pulled to a stop too, his sleeve in Wilbur’s grip.

“What?” Tubbo asks, hidden entirely behind Wilbur so Techno can’t see him at all, just hears his voice from further down this narrow hall.

“What’s that?” Wilbur’s voice is flat, barely a question. He points to the ground just ahead of Techno’s foot, and Techno swings his flashlight over the area in question.

He doesn’t see what Wilbur is referring to at first, eyes passing over cracks in the corner of the hall where the floor meets the sheer stone wall, over the spattering of some plant pushing its way through the crack, over...

“There is no way something should be growing down here,” Wilbur says. “There is no light. Plants like that don’t grow here.”

“Fucking cool,” Tubbo says behind Wilbur, annoyed and impatient. “Discover your new plant later, can we get going?”

“It shouldn’t be growing down here,” Wilbur says again, more insistent. “I don’t know what that is, but it’s not *right*.”

Techno kneels down to take a closer look at it. It’s a small thing, looking at first like a little root or stem, maybe as long as the length of Techno’s hand. It grows up the side of the wall, clinging on to it, and when Techno reaches out to snap off a piece of it, something red stays behind on his hand.

He hands the piece back to Wilbur and rubs his fingers against his jeans. “Just a plant.”

“What the fuck kind of plant...” Wilbur takes it, and he gives a suspicious look to where it grows. Tubbo makes another grumble of impatience. Techno takes a step forward, leaving this area behind.

But now that Wilbur’s pointed it out, he can’t stop noticing it. There are little sprigs of red in the corners of this path, and when the path leads out to an open mineshaft again, he sees it there too. It’s all just tiny pieces everywhere he notices it, flashes of crimson branching their way through the ground and up the walls.

He’s considering saying something to Wilbur, bringing it back up and admitting maybe he’s right. He goes to turn around as the rest of the group files out of the tunnel-like path, and as he does, something else catches his eye.

There is a light down here that did not come from him.

There is a light ahead of them, further down this mine shaft. All five freeze in place as one, even when Techno’s whole body screams to keep moving.

The light doesn't move, dim and stationary. For a long, long moment, they're all holding their breath and waiting. Techno's hand wraps around the knife in his pocket, fingers hovering over the switch to flip the blade outwards.

"Everyone behind me," he says, quietly but leaving no room for argument. Somehow, none of them argue. He feels Tubbo pressed close behind him, barely heeding his words despite the impatience he knows he's feeling.

Carefully, he takes one step. He takes another. The ground is cracked in even more places here, and now that Wilbur's pointed it out, he can't stop noticing the streaks of red that catch his eye. Curling upwards and through the cracks, through the rocks, reaching up to wrap around and pull...

He takes another step.

The light comes into view, and he realizes what it is abruptly. A flashlight dropped on the ground, left switched on and bleeding dim light into the pitch darkness of the mine, and...

And just behind it, slumped against the wall, sits Bad.

There's a gun at his side, lying like it was dropped and forgotten on the ground. The shirt he's wearing is spattered with dark stains all over the front, and Techno's stomach turns. It's *so much* blood. Instinctively, he's reaching one arm out because he knows Sapnap is going to rush ahead when he sees this, tries to block his view for a moment, and then—

Then Bad turns his head to squint at the group of them.

He looks fine. He looks tired, he looks worn, and an expression of weary sadness rests in his eyes when they meet Techno's. But there's no twist of pain, or pale tint of blood loss...

It's not his, Techno realizes in that split second moment.

"Dad?" Sapnap's voice is strangled and rushed. Like he's still shocked to see him here. He starts to move forward, but Techno keeps his arm stretched out to block his path.

"He's not hurt," Techno says, just in case that realization hasn't clicked for everyone else.

Bad stares at Sapnap, and as he does, heartbreak shatters across his face. "No. No, no, no, *why* are you here?"

"To figure out what the hell is going on!" Sapnap curls his hands into fists. "What the fuck is happening?"

"You can't be here. You can't—This was all to keep you away! Why would you bring everyone?" Bad asks, looking back at Techno, sounding frantically upset. "This wasn't the plan. Why would you bring them *all here*?"

Techno doesn't know what to say to that. "Huh?"

Bad shakes his head, scrubs both hands over his eyes. "No, no no..."

Techno's mind spins. He tries to understand.

"Explain," Tubbo says, his voice low and shaking with barely controlled fury. "Explain right *fucking* now. You lied to me, you—"

"I'm really sorry, Tubbo," Bad says, and he sounds like he means it. He looks so apologetic, and it sits so strangely in Techno. "This isn't what I wanted, I just... I was just trying to..."

"'Sorry' doesn't cut it! You—you fucking told me you didn't see Tommy, and it was all a lie! You—" Tubbo takes a sharp step forward, hands in fists. His eyes flick to the gun on the floor, to the blood covering Bad's shirt, and when his little brother next speaks, it's with a voice so quietly dangerous that Techno has never heard from him before. "You shot Ranboo. You..."

Bad is quiet. And then, "Is he okay?"

"No fucking thanks to you!" Tubbo explodes, lunging forward, and Wilbur's there to hold him back. One arm wrapped around his waist, and Tubbo struggles against it until he's nearly off the ground, fighting Wilbur. "After everything—after *everything*, I thought I could trust you! I believed you, I thought you were *good*!"

Techno sees the way Bad flinches at that. Sapnap's stepped forward too now, and his voice overlaps Tubbo's anger—"I don't understand, why would you do this? What could have possibly made you take Tommy, and—and hurt Ranboo..."

"—you looked me in the eye and said you wished you could help and were doing everything you could, and the *entire time*—"

"Why didn't you bring him here?" Techno interrupts, and Bad's gaze switches back to him. Tubbo and Sapnap go quiet, even though Tubbo still breathes heavy and angry as he claws himself out of Wilbur's grasp. "That's what you were supposed to do, right? He should've been here."

Bad looks at him, and then he looks at everyone else, and he lets out a sigh. He starts to get to his feet, weight shifting, and everyone freaks out instantly.

"Don't fucking move," Tubbo snarls, and Techno takes the knife from his pocket, flips the blade outward. It's pretty useless against the gun that's still closer to Bad's reach than any of theirs, but it's at least something.

Bad raises his hands, freezing in place. "Okay, okay. Not moving."

"Hand the gun over too," Techno adds. Without a moment of hesitation, Bad does, sliding it across the rocky floor to rest somewhere by Wilbur's feet. The hesitation comes from his brother instead, who waits a moment too long before reaching down to pick it up.

"You didn't answer my question," Techno says, turning his attention back to Bad. "Why didn't you bring Ranboo here? Why shoot him and just leave him to bleed out?"

“It was... an accident,” Bad says, regret tangible in his voice. “A mistake. He would’ve been dead by the time we got here.”

Tubbo’s eyes narrow. “So... What? Why did he need to be alive for you to bring him here? Why would you even bring him here at all? Why did you take *Tommy*? Where—Where is Tommy? What did you do to him?”

Bad looks so, so sad. “I’m really sorry. For all of you, I’m really sorry.”

“*Where is he?!*” It’s nearly a scream, torn out of Tubbo’s throat. Wilbur is ready to catch him if he lunges for Bad again, but Tubbo is frozen in place.

“He’s already gone,” Bad says. And he says it again, an apology that turns Techno’s stomach and makes everything feel wrong. “He’s gone. I’m sorry, Tubbo.”

Distantly, Techno hears Tubbo scream again. He doesn’t hear the words; he hears the way his voice breaks and he hears the hurt and the fury and he hears a lifetime of pain that his little brother has held inside of him as it all tears out of his chest. He hears it, he feels it, it rings in him and bleeds into the emptiness below his feet.

There is a heart beating in Techno’s head. There is something tugging at him below his feet.

His little brother is close enough that Techno could reach out and hold him. His little brother is here.

*Here, here, here*, the voices whisper. And Tommy’s voice is one of them.

“That’s what this is,” Techno realizes. He feels sick. He feels dizzy. He feels like if he closes his eyes, he will not be here anymore. “They’re... They’re *them*.”

They are all the voices of those who are here and never left. They are alone and together and desperate and searching, and they reach up to grab onto Techno with fingers that were once corporeal and aren’t anymore.

Everyone was right, Techno thinks. This is a curse, and now Techno has seen it too. It lives in his chest along with theirs.

“There’s still a chance for you to leave,” Bad says, something mournful in his voice. “You can still go. Sapnap, Tubbo, Wilbur—you can leave. You don’t have to be part of this.”

Techno does not miss the way he and Quackity are singled out from that. The whispers in his head are as insistent as ever.

*We’re here, we’re here, we’re right here. We’re here. We’re ready. We’re waiting.*

“You’ve got another thing coming if you think I’m not part of this already,” Sapnap says. “Where—Where is *Karl*? ”

“I don’t know where he is,” Bad says. “Down here somewhere, maybe. Gone too, I don’t know. I haven’t seen him.”

Sapnap goes silent. Techno feels the tension in him, ready to explode.

“You bring people to them,” Techno says. Bad gives him a look with a raised eyebrow, something sad but pointed. “You’re the one who... who feeds them.”

It’s a morbid description, and it isn’t quite right - it isn’t feeding that they want, he doesn’t think. It’s *company*. A reprieve from the aching emptiness that seeps through every last one of them.

“I’m not the only one,” Bad says. He looks at Techno. It’s pointed. It lodges itself in Techno’s ribs and suddenly, suddenly, breath knocked from his lungs, he gets it. “There were more of us, once, but now it’s just me. They’ve been so insistent lately, so loud. They wanted more, so now Karl... and *you*.”

“*Why would you bring all of them?*” Bad had asked. And now he gets it.

This was never about them wanting *Techno*. He’s not the one they were asking for.

Oh, he’s an idiot.

Techno doesn’t know what to say. Everyone looks at him now, and he can feel something like betrayal leaching from all of them.

“It wasn’t,” he starts to say, trying to find an explanation - Wilbur’s eyes go surprised, sad, hurt. Tubbo and Sapnap look angry. Quackity looks like he’s accepted this a long time ago. “It isn’t like that.”

“I’m not faulting you,” Bad says, so gently, like he’s trying to offer some comfort. “I understand. When you’ve already lost one person, you’ll do anything to keep someone else safe.”

There’s too many things happening in his mind at once now - echoing insistence, begging and pleading, reverberating inside his skull; the roots of panic, the roots of realizing that this—this was all a mistake. He shouldn’t have brought any of them. He’s *really* fucked up this time, and he doesn’t know how to get them all out of this. They need to leave, they...

“You offered me a ride home.” Quackity speaks up now, his voice quiet. It’s the first time he’s spoken since they’ve gotten here, Techno realizes. He maybe should’ve checked on him before this, but he’s been distracted. “The night Karl tried to kill me. You wanted to drive me back to Sapnap’s, and I would’ve been alone.”

Bad’s expression is—guarded. Sad. Careful.

“I don’t know what you did to catch their attention,” Bad says, “but they’ve been *so* insistent about you, Quackity. I am really sorry.”

Quackity shakes his head, looking dazed. “I didn’t even do it. It wasn’t even me.”

“It started the day with your father,” Bad says, and he looks apologetic again, like he feels bad bringing it up at all. “That’s when they started calling for you. Whatever you did that

day...”

“He isn’t the one who did it,” Wilbur says. “Why would it go after him? Why is *Techno* the one who hears them and not me?”

Techno tries to keep up, tries to follow what they’re saying, lets them stall while he tries to think of something between the pounding echoes in his head. There’s something he’s missing here.

“My dad was one of you,” Quackity says, like he’s piecing together images that Techno doesn’t quite see. “This is where my mom went. Isn’t it?”

Bad’s quiet. That’s enough of an answer.

“How long,” Sapnap interrupts. “How *long* have you been doing this? For you to know—to have known this *whole time*—”

“There’s still a chance for you to leave,” Bad says, ignoring Sapnap’s question. “You can still go, you don’t need to be part of this, you can leave—”

“Why Quackity?” Wilbur demands to know, and he raises the gun in his hands. They’re shaking. “Why Techno? Why them and not me? *I* did it. Not him. Why not me?”

Techno stares. He feels like he’s falling, he feels like there’s something empty in his chest and there’s something grabbing at his lungs and he’s falling down and—

Wilbur was in the woods with Quackity and his father. Wilbur was there when he shot himself.

Wilbur’s hands are wrapped around a gun as if it’s second nature and shaking like a bad memory.

“Oh,” Techno says.

Bad’s expression echoes Techno’s own realization. “It was you.”

“I killed him,” Wilbur says. He spits out the words, a bitter admission that sounds unfamiliar on his tongue, and Techno wonders if he’s ever said this aloud before. Tubbo goes stiff and still at his side. “*I did*. I’m the one who... If he was one of *you*, one of the people who did *this*— I’m the one who ruined their plans. So why doesn’t... Why isn’t it me they want?”

“It should’ve been you,” Bad says, like he’s agreeing, and then he says, “You don’t feel them at all?”

“No.” Wilbur’s hands are still shaking. “I don’t know. It feels... it feels like...”

“Like there’s something empty,” Quackity offers. “Like it’s eating your chest and taking it for itself.”

Like there’s something just under you that won’t leave you in peace, Techno could add.

Techno feels like he's standing over a gaping chasm. His feet are on the edge of it, and it's crumbling slowly, slowly, rocks peeling off and falling down below into an endless dark void. Around his ankles, up his legs, something wraps around and pulls, tugging him closer to the edge. Not to pull him in; he understands that much from them. They're not here to harm him. They're here to make him look, and to make him understand.

There is something unfathomably dark below his feet. There is an emptiness so full that it *aches*. It seeps into him, from the ground up, pools in his chest and empties him slowly too.

*Here, they say. Here is where we are. Here is where you will all be.*

"You need to leave," Techno says. Wilbur stares at him like he's lost his mind. "You need to take Tubbo and go."

"No," Tubbo says. "We're not—"

"Fucking go." Techno's voice becomes a snarl, and it's enough to make Tubbo take a step back in surprise. Techno turns over the knife in his hand. He switches the blade outward. "Get out."

"Yeah right we're gonna just go," Sapnap starts, and Techno rounds on him now. He takes a step forward, and Sapnap does too, putting himself between Techno and Quackity.

"You too," Techno says. "Get out of here."

"Absolutely not," Sapnap says.

"Please," Bad says quietly, behind Techno. "Pandas. Just go."

Frustration climbs up his chest, to his throat and screams at him. They don't get to choose. This isn't up to them. The heart beating in him is loud, loud, loud.

"Sapnap," Quackity interrupts. He puts a hand on Sapnap's shoulder from behind, gently pushes him towards Wilbur. "They're right, actually. You have to leave."

Sapnap stares at him in disbelief. "And leave you behind? Q, no. I told you, I-I *promised* you—I'm not leaving you behind."

Quackity gives him a smile, sad and gentle. "It's gonna be okay."

"You guys don't get a choice about this," Techno says. "You're leaving. We're staying. Go. Now."

For a moment, he and Wilbur lock eyes. There's something in Wil's gaze, something in the way his hands go tight and steady around the gun he's still holding - the gun he's raising, pointed in Techno's direction, but there's never a moment that Techno thinks to worry about it. He stands still, shoulders straight, knife in one hand. He looks Wilbur in the eye, and Wilbur looks back.

*Trust me*, Techno thinks, and he offers the words to the thing under his feet and in his head and they curl around it, wrap around them and take them for themselves, *trust us, trust us, trust us*. Quietly, silently, wordlessly, he offers this to Wilbur too.

Wilbur lowers the weapon. He looks to Tubbo. “Okay.”

“*Okay?*” Tubbo cries unbelievably. “You’re just gonna go along with this?”

“Trust me,” Wilbur says. It echoes in Techno’s chest. It reverberates there and Techno holds on to it. “Come on, Tubbo.”

Wilbur’s hand is on Tubbo’s sleeve, and Tubbo looks at him like a traitor. “Trust me,” Wilbur murmurs again, quietly, just soft enough that Techno can barely hear.

*Let me do this*, Techno is thinking, hard enough to try to make the words audible, put them in Wilbur’s head, Tubbo’s, Sapnap’s. *This is what they want, this is the best way. This is what we want.*

Bad gets to his feet. No one stops him now. “Please listen to them, Sapnap. You have to leave, now.”

“Or what?” Sapnap turns, faces his father and squares his shoulders. “You gonna kill me too? Shoot me like you did Ranboo, or leave me trapped down here forever like Karl, or—or *whatever* you did to Tommy?”

“No,” Bad says, his voice pained. “I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t *ever* hurt you. I’d do anything to keep you safe. *Anything*, Sapnap. And that’s why you need to leave now, before—before I have to do something even worse to make sure you stay alive.”

Sapnap just stares. “Jesus, Dad... What the hell is this?”

“Go,” Bad says, quiet, without an answer. “You don’t need to know. Please. Go.”

“Go,” Quackity echoes, just as quiet. He leans in, lips on Sapnap’s cheek, and Techno barely catches the way his mouth moves in a whisper as he does. Sapnap’s eyes widen slightly, but he steels his expression back into something neutral. It’s almost too quick to notice anything else. Techno’s sure Bad didn’t see. Techno himself disregards the moment from his mind as soon as it passes.

*Nearly there*, he thinks instead. It turns into an echoed whisper. *Nearly there, nearly there, nearly here.*

“Fine,” Sapnap mutters. “Jesus— *Fuck*. Fine!” He hesitates one moment longer, grabs Quackity into a long hug that Techno wonders if he should turn away for, and then he steps back to Wilbur’s side.

Wilbur meets Techno’s eyes one last time. He’s still holding that gun, loose in his hand at his side.

*Good luck*, Wilbur’s eyes say silently. *Don’t fuck this up.*



Techno turns around, and he doesn't watch them leave. He looks at Quackity instead.

"You sure about this?" Techno asks. Bad's just beside them, but he doesn't really care. What's Bad going to do at this point? Techno's knife really is the only weapon in reach now. It's just the three of them, and two more to find, and an endless fullness tugging all of them down.

"I'm sure," Quackity says, and he sounds it too. He sounds utterly certain. It's been a long time since Techno has spoken to Quackity for real - years, at least. He's different now than he was when they were kids, but Techno thinks they all are. He can't fault Quackity for the way he's a little quieter, a little sharper, a little better at hiding behind a face that only gives what he wants the world to see.

"I really am sorry." Bad speaks up again, but both of them ignore it.

Bad leads the two of them down the rocky tunnel of the mine. Rocks crunch under their feet, water dripping overhead into puddles they mostly avoid by the light of Techno and Bad's flashlights. They walk in silence, between the minecart tracks, Techno and Quackity side by side, Bad just ahead. Techno keeps ahold of the knife in his hand. He passes the flashlight in his other to Quackity.

With every step, he has to focus a little harder on the ground under his feet, the feeling of cold seeping into his hands and toes, the splash of droplets of water on his head, running down his hair, on his neck. He has to work a little harder to stay present and not be swept up in the current of sound, of calling, of a promise for something better, something waiting, just under him. Just ahead of him. Just...

Bad leads them to an offshoot of the main mine shaft, a tunnel held up by wooden supports and beams. Light shines off of the black-streaked walls. Even here, between the coal and the rock, Techno sees little red roots forcing their way through the ground and the walls. There's more of them here, and bigger too. The further they walk, the more noticeable they become.

"I think Wilbur was right," Quackity says softly, poking at one of the roots with his foot. It crumbles slightly, squishing more like fungus rather than snapping like a twig. "This isn't normal."

Bad glances back at them. "Don't touch it if you can avoid it."

"Why? Is it poisonous?" Quackity asks, as casually as if he was not being lead to his death.

"Something like that," Bad says. "It can... leave some pretty nasty scars."

Techno thinks of the piece he'd taken earlier. "Didn't hurt me."

"It won't," Bad says. "It won't do anything to its own."

Ah. Quackity shies away from the roots, standing closer to Techno's side once again. They lapse into silence once again, walking further down this long tunnel. The red grows thicker and thicker as they walk.

Bad breaks the silence this time. “I meant the apologies that I said earlier. I know I’ve done some pretty awful things. I’m... I’m not a good person. I know that.”

There are many things Techno could say in response to that. They sit angry and bitter on his tongue.

*We grew up with you, he thinks. We were kids and we played in your yard, and you have our photos hanging in your hall, and you brought us meals when Tommy went missing. You nearly raised us, and Tommy trusted you as well as we did.*

Bad brought them food and all the while he knew just where Tommy had gone.

Techno says none of it. He lets Bad suffer in silence.

“You have to understand why,” Bad says, and Techno bites back, *No, I don’t*. “Sapnap reminds me so much of... of the one I lost. He’s so bored here, he always has been. He wants something more exciting. He wants to leave, wants to see more than this little town—”

“He was going to,” Quackity says. There is something angry in his voice. “With Karl. They had plans.”

“I know,” Bad says mournfully. “I know. I wish it hadn’t gone for Karl. I wish I could’ve protected him too, could’ve protected all of you...”

“You didn’t.” The words snap out of Techno’s mouth. “You didn’t, though. And I’m fucking tired of hearing your excuses about it.”

“You have to understand.” Bad pleads with him one more time. “What if it was Tubbo? Wilbur? Your dad? Now that you know they can take *anyone* you love—what would you do to keep the others safe?”

Techno doesn’t answer. He doesn’t know quite what to say - hears an echo of *what would you do, what would you do, what else is there to do* - cuts it off, focuses on the ground ahead of him. The metal handle of a knife dug against his fingers. Quackity at his side, looking straight ahead. Red roots pushing through the ground, up the walls, wrapped around wooden beams and supports, bigger and more obvious as they begin to dominate the tunnel itself. The beam of Quackity’s flashlight, passing over dark coal vein and rust-stained rock and crimson that twists and climbs and clusters around something up ahead—

Quackity gasps. “Holy fuck, *Karl*—”

He runs ahead, and when Bad makes a move to stop him, Techno moves ahead too. Grabs Bad’s arm and pulls him off balance, gives Quackity the space to run, even if it isn’t far. Bad grunts, stumbles for a moment, but catches himself and pulls away.

“What was that?” Bad wheels around, glares at Techno, light flashing in his eyes, and he’s blinded. Techno blinks spots from his vision, one hand over his face to shield himself. “If you’re planning an escape, this is a terrible time to try it.”

He squints through his fingers, blurred shapes and darkened colors. Quackity's kneeling on the ground ahead of them, hands hovering just above the tendrils of red that Techno can only barely see wrapped around a human's shape. "I thought you said they wouldn't hurt one of their own."

"He isn't anymore," Techno guesses. "He pissed them off."

"He was supposed to bring you back," Bad says, backing up Techno's theory. "He didn't do his job."

"Fuck you," Quackity spits. Techno's eyes are still re-adjusting, but he can hear the fury rolling off of him. "*Fuck you.* You knew he was here. You—Fuck! You brought him here! You were out that night, you were on your way back when you found us, yeah? You *brought him here and left him to die!*"

"Is he dead?" Bad asks, sounding at least a little sad about it. Techno feels the same fury sitting somewhere in his stomach, but he keeps it down. He keeps it quiet, and it turns into an empty ache in his chest instead.

"I don't know!" Quackity's voice shakes. Techno sees the red in front of him, sees a glimpse of brightly colored fabric peeking between it, sees the moment Quackity gives up and tears at the plant with his bare hands. "I don't know, I can't—fuck, ow—I can't get to him!"

"Q," Techno says, calm, maybe a little sharper than he means to be. "Keep it together. Don't touch it if it hurts you."

"I have to get him," Quackity says again, frantic, and another muttered '*ouch,*' and they need a better plan than this, fuck—

*Here, here, here!* They're loud, they're begging, Quackity is *far too close, right here, a little closer, aren't you tired of running? Aren't you ready to close your eyes and rest?*

"Okay," Techno says, throwing caution to the wind. He gives up on keeping his mind clear, and he lets his anger snap through his voice. He raises the knife in his hand, blade out and clear and reflecting in the beam of light that Bad is holding, and he points it right at the neighbor he once trusted like a second father. "Get Karl out. Now."

Bad stares down the blade of the knife. "Techno, you can't do this."

"I can," Techno growls. "And I am. Get Karl fucking now. And then you're showing me where you left Tommy—where you took my brother who *fucking trusted you* and left him to die alone."

Bad flinches. He raises his hands, and he takes a slow step back. Techno takes another forward, and that's how they move, backed up to where Quackity still kneels.

In his head, it is nearly a scream. He struggles to keep focused, he needs to, he has to, this cannot be like before, he needs to *focus*, he needs to hold this knife and look at Bad and not listen to them—

*Right here! Right here! Stay, stay, isn't this what you want?*

“—can't do this, Techno,” Bad is saying, even as his hands work to loosen vines wrapped around Karl's body. “This isn't what you want to do.”

“I think it is,” Techno says casually. “This is exactly what I want.”

*This is what we want.* He doesn't know if he thinks it or if they do, but it beats in his head like a single heartbeat, and he could nearly laugh at it for that.

When Karl is free, Quackity all but pushes Bad away, reaching out to pull him free and gently, gently take his hands, his face, leans his head down close.

“He's breathing,” Quackity says, so softly, a whispered prayer. Techno nods.

“Get out of here,” Techno says. “They're too fuckin' loud with you around. Go.”

“You can't,” Bad says again, more insistent, voice rising to a shout. “Techno, you can't do this! You can't take this away from them again, do you know what happened before? Look at Karl!”

Techno glares at him. Over Bad's shoulder, he watches Quackity sling Karl's arm over one shoulder, struggle to his feet, inch his way back down the mine. “Show me Tommy.”

“Tommy's *gone!*” Bad nearly screams. “It's been weeks, Techno! He's gone. He's not even here anymore, there's nothing left.”

Techno lifts his knife. He says it again, slower. “Show me Tommy.”

Bad gestures behind himself, to the wall, to crimson branches that seem to move as Techno watches. “Here, there, I don't know! He's gone, Techno, and you can't fix this. You know what this is? You know that it's never going to go away? No matter what you do, you can't get him back, you can't fix this, he's gone forever and you didn't get here fast enough and this is the end! Give up, and keep *them* safe instead!”

Bad's breathing heavy, tears on his face, and something screams in Techno's head. The heart beats and beats and beats. As one, they take a deep breath, and the heart beats for both of them.

*This is what I want,* Techno says, and he is part of them, and he makes them listen to him too. *This is what we want.*

“You can't stop this,” Bad says, and the thing is, he sounds heartbroken as he says it. He says it with tears in his eyes and the saddest smile Techno has ever seen. “No one can.”

Techno takes a step back. He feels the wall at his shoulders, feels something move when he brushes against it - crimson on his back, crimson at his feet. Something wraps around his ankles, and it's *real* this time. Something in his chest draws him ever downwards.

*I know what I want, Techno thinks. I know what you promised me. I'm here for it now, and you'll fucking give it to me.*

“That’s the thing, Bad,” Techno says. The heartbeat in his head is so loud. This is where it wants him to be. This is where he wants to be. He laughs, and it’s a real one. It’s gentle, it’s a quiet bubble in his chest, in his mouth. “I’m not trying to stop it.”

It wraps around his arms and his legs and it pulls him and he *lets it*. He’s falling, he lets himself fall, it is dark and he is caught in this emptiness and he does not fight it.

This is where he wants to be.

The heart beats in his head.

And Tommy is in front of him.

## Chapter End Notes

last cliffhanger this fic i swear we will have nice things someday soon

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Summary

A sob chokes itself from Techno's mouth. He takes a step forward, and the ground does not fall out from under him. This is real, this is real, he is here. He takes another, another, he reaches his arms out and he's close enough to touch, and he does. Hesitantly, carefully, afraid Tommy might vanish under his fingers. Tommy meets him halfway, hand in warm, solid, real hand.

"I'm sorry," Techno tells him, chokes out the words in a hushed sort of quiet. "I never stopped looking."

"I know," Tommy says.

And then he's in Techno's arms.

## Chapter Notes

haha hi guys! surprise! early update this week :D

once again, thank you guys SO MUCH for the honestly overwhelming amount of support you've all been showing this fic the last few days. i still haven't gotten to any comments, but my plan is to go back and answer all of them after i've finished the fic. i just don't have the time to answer them all AND keep writing the story, but i don't want anyone's comment to be skipped - so! this is what we're gonna go with.

it kind of hit me this chapter that the story is pretty much over now, but i'm saving the sappy authors note for next chapter (which will be a much shorter epilogue). i'll just leave you guys with a firm *thank you*. thank you all so much.

Techno stands in the darkness.

Techno stands somewhere so dark and deep and empty that he's lost all sense of where he is, barely holds on to *who* he is, feels something in his head and chest running through him like a single current.

But he is not uncomfortable. He is exactly where he wants to be. It is dark, the walls press close around him, like a blanket tucked warm over his shoulders. In his hands, his chest, coaxing and gently whispering, something sweet and quiet wraps around him. It winds around his ankles and his wrists, soft and gentle. His chest is full with it.

He is where he wants to be. He could lie down here and stay here forever in peace.

And Tommy is in front of him.

“Hey,” Techno breathes, because he can. Because he can speak, he can move, he can breathe as freely as he chooses. And Tommy is still here.

Tommy is here, and his eyes are grey with a hint of blue and there is blood on his face but only traces of it, dried and rubbed away. He’s tired, but now he smiles. He’s here. He’s here.

“Took you long enough,” Tommy says.

A sob chokes itself from Techno’s mouth. He takes a step forward, and the ground does not fall out from under him. This is real, *this is real*, he is here. He takes another, another, he reaches his arms out and he’s close enough to touch, and he does. Hesitantly, carefully, afraid Tommy might vanish under his fingers. Tommy meets him halfway, hand in *warm, solid, real hand*.

“I’m sorry,” Techno tells him, chokes out the words in a hushed sort of quiet. “I never stopped looking.”

“I know,” Tommy says.

And then he’s in Techno’s arms.

He’s warm, he’s here, he’s real and Techno holds him *so* close. He’s thin and he’s shaking, and his hands grip the back of Techno’s jacket with fingers so tight they could snap, and he is here. Techno holds him close and he doesn’t let go. He hears his heart beat and beat in his ears, in his chest, but he’s here.

He hears one heartbeat. He hears it in his head, he feels it in his chest and in the pulse that winds his wrists and his ankles. It hums against him where Tommy’s chest is pressed against his own, beating the same rhythm in both of them.

“Kinda thought you weren’t ever gonna show up,” Tommy says, and his voice cracks and shakes. Techno wants to squeeze him tighter, but he’s afraid his little brother will break if he does. “Didn’t think anyone would ever find me.”

“I wouldn’t have rested until I did,” Techno says. He buries his face against Tommy’s hair, squeezes his eyes shut and takes this in. He holds his little brother. “Missed you.”

“Missed you too,” Tommy says with a watery laugh. “Fucking sap.”

Techno echoes the laugh. There’s something wet on his face, escaping behind closed eyelids and dampening Tommy’s hair. “Don’t make fun of me, you brat.”

Tommy laughs, and it turns into a sob, and he grips Techno even tighter. Carefully, Techno eases them both down, kneeling on this thing that’s almost a floor, a surface that is the mine he’d been standing in but also *isn’t*. He’s not sure where exactly they are. He doesn’t care to take the time to figure it out.

A heartbeat echoes in his ears - Tommy's heart, his own heart, *their* heart. The one they share with everything here, the thing that creeps up their legs now that they're sat here. That ever so gently coaxes them further down.

"I've been so tired," Tommy whispers as the sobs that shake his shoulders begin to calm. "It's—it's been so long. I've been so alone."

Techno's heart - *their* heart - shatters and breaks and rebuilds, piece by bloodstained piece. "I know. I'm here now."

"You're here now," Tommy echoes. It's a whisper, and it's a promise, held with shaking fingers and hushed breath.

"And I'm never going to leave," Techno says. "Never letting you out of my sight again."

"You've gone clingy as well as sappy," Tommy says. Techno smiles. He leans back to look at his brother's face, runs his thumbs over his cheeks to swipe away tears.

"Maybe a little," he admits.

Tommy holds on to Techno's wrists. His hands are so thin, and his face is lined with exhaustion, grey and so worn without the life that's been slowly draining out of him. He's been here *so long*.

The heart aches for Tommy like it never has before. Techno's grief wraps up in it and colors it; it carries the weight he gives it, because it is his as well as theirs now. Tommy's been holding on for all this time, and he doesn't need to anymore. He has been brave for long enough.

Tommy curls in once again, wrapped in Techno's arms and against his chest. Their heart beats in Techno's ears. It beats in both of their chests, in the pulse they share with everything around them. The heart is heavy and it is theirs, but for now, it is Techno's to carry.

"You're allowed to let go if you want to," Techno whispers to him. "You don't have to stay anymore."

"Not yet." Tommy's eyes are closed again. Techno thinks he feels a trace of something deeper, recognizes it, knows Tommy catches what else he'd meant to say and gives it right back. "I want to be with you awhile longer."

So Techno holds him.

He holds his brother, who doesn't not sleep but he stays with his eyes closed while the heart beats fondly for him.

It's Techno who put it there, he thinks. The fondness. The heart is not used to it, and it will not keep it forever, but as long as the heart is Techno's, as long as they carry the weight he gives it - they are fond.

They are fond, and they love, and Tommy rests in his brother's arms.



The heart beats in their chests.

And Techno's knife is still in his pocket.

The moment he thinks of it, a flicker of unease pulses through the heart, a jitter that puts them on edge. Techno does his best to soothe, quiet thoughts and looking down at Tommy still half-curved in his lap. He feels a second surge of the same feeling, smaller, more tired, and he can't help the ache in his chest. The heart beats in both of their chests as one.

"Hey, Toms." Techno runs his thumb over Tommy's face again, and with his other hand, his fingers tighten around the handle of the knife. Tommy's tired eyes flicker up to meet his own. "You know I love you?"

A smile ghosts on Tommy's mouth. "Yeah. I know."

He musters up the strongest sense of affection he can feel, looks down at his brother and *aches* with how much he loves him. He drowns the heart in it. He hopes Tommy can feel it. He hopes it's the biggest thing he's ever felt.

And Techno drives the knife into the heart that he and Tommy share.

Instantly, everything changes.

Techno's entire world is *hell*. The thing in his chest explodes, sharp fragments and screaming pain that tears inside of him. He forgets to breathe, grits his teeth because he doesn't know if he can scream, doesn't have the air for it.

He can hear something else screaming - Tommy, he thinks; other voices too, overlapped and hurt and terrified and *screaming*, in his head, in his ears, ringing ringing he can't breathe—

And he still feels the heart, somewhere in him, trying not to die. He grabs it, he holds it, he forces it to stay right here in his grasp, and he lets Tommy go - pushes, doesn't know what he's doing, *does his best*. The thing that once wrapped around him like a comforting embrace is now strangling, but he doesn't care. He feels something burning, up his arms, in his chest, right between his ribs where his own heart should be and is gone now, replaced by something else that is not truly his.

They're trying to shake him off, trying to tear him apart, and with all the stubbornness his family is known best for, Techno *holds on*.

*Go ahead and try it*, he thinks. He sends the spite to mix with pain and he keeps going. *Take me down with you. I'm not letting go.*

He thinks it's going to do just that. It's hands grabbing him, desperate to find the thing hurting them and make it *stop*, and what they find is him. Clawed hands, burning tearing

pulling and he doesn't let go. He holds it, he shares its pain, he bites back the scream in his throat. It beats weaker, weaker. It struggles in his grasp.

*Go ahead*, he thinks again, as their heart flickers and his goes with it. He has one last moment to think, vindication and pain, their own words spat back bloodily in their face as Techno feels the heart start to go still, *Is this what you wanted?*

Cold air on his face.

He gasps—cold air in his lungs—rolls to his knees. His arms *burn*.

“Holy fuck,” Quackity says.

Techno whirls around, snatches the flashlight from Quackity's hands. The roots behind him retreat, curling away from his arms and legs, back to the walls and climbing upwards.

Didn't kill them, he thinks regretfully. Didn't kill him either, though he's not sure how close of a thing it is quite yet. Doesn't take the time to check his own injuries now, doesn't have the chance, because—

He sees the crumpled shape of red-stained pajamas, and nothing else matters.

Time is—

Time is a funny thing.

Once, Techno thought time would stretch on forever and unchanging in front of him. It blurs together in a way he can't separate, mixes with an emptiness in his chest and rings in his head. It circles back on itself, a shape with no end and no meaning.

Time is a series of moments, all separate and all interconnected, jumbled in his head. He's beside Tommy, he's pulling him into his lap, two fingers under his chin. There's a slow and weak pulse under his hands, and time is stopped while he sobs his relief.

He holds his brother in his arms. In his head, things are quiet. He doesn't know whether this is the start or the end or somewhere in between, but he holds his brother. He is alive. They all are.

“How did you...” Bad says, terrified, awestruck, and oh, right. He's here. Techno fixes him with a glare. He gets to his feet, achingly lifting Tommy into his arms.

“Fuck you,” he says. He gives him no other answer, and looks at Quackity instead. “Told you to leave.”

Quackity is still knelt on the ground, Karl slumped beside him. Red lines spread across Karl's skin, an angry patchwork. “Yeah, but that was *before* you decided to climb into some eldritch monster and... stab it? I guess?”

“What did you *do*?” Bad repeats again, voice rising, something frantic. He stares at the roots behind Techno in horror, and now Techno has the mind to look at them again too. They’re all moving, curling tighter, wrapped around wooden support beams and up walls and through cracks that...

Cracks that widen. He realizes in a split second what’s going on.

“Okay,” Techno says. He shifts Tommy in his arms, gathers his limp form a little closer. “Time to run.”

Quackity gets to his feet, hunched under Karl’s weight over his shoulders, and together, they make their way down the passageway. Red roots stretch from the walls as Quackity passes, reaching towards him and wrapping around his ankle and tugging him momentarily off balance. Techno darts forward and stomps one foot right on it, and the rest retreat, shying away from Techno and curling back in on themselves.

“That’s what I fucking thought,” Techno mutters. Quackity gives him a relieved look.

It’s just the two - the four - of them, Techno realizes. He turns around, and Bad stands stock still in the middle of the mineshaft. He hasn’t moved.

“Let’s fucking go,” Techno says, rushed impatience in his voice. Something rumbles under his feet. “Help Quackity with Karl or something!”

There’s a look in Bad’s eyes - distant, uncertain - and it lingers on Tommy, on Techno. He shakes his head, slow and hesitant. “No. No, I—”

Techno bites back something angry that grows from his stomach into his chest. It’s his own feeling, and it roots in there in a normal way. Not something that aches. He nudges Quackity, who stumbles ahead, nearly dragging Karl. He presses his flashlight into Quackity’s hand before he turns back, a rushed, “Keep going.”

And then he looks back. “Bad, come on! We’ve already done it, just help us get out! Haven’t you done enough to ruin everything?”

“I have,” Bad agrees, solemn. “You’ll never make it out. They’ll tear the whole mine down long before any of you get to the surface.”

“So *help us!*” Techno itches to run - he itches to try to make it out, even as he feels the ground under him shake again and something above his head *cracks*.

“I will.” Bad holds out a hand, and one root wraps around it. Not desperate, not angry, not something intent on dragging him in. It just loops around his fingers and stays there. With his other hand, he holds out his flashlight to Techno. “Tell Sapnap I love him, okay?”

Techno hesitates for only a moment. He shifts Tommy enough to take the light, and he nods. “I will.”

There are no last minute apologies or forgiveness offered. There is only Bad with a smile on his face and crimson branches wrapped around his fingers like something holding his hand,

and Techno turns away. He turns, and he runs.

He catches up with Quackity in less than a minute, and he has to slow down. Quackity glances at him. “Bad?”

“Buying us time,” Techno says. “We’ve gotta hurry.”

“Trying,” Quackity grumbles. “Little—Little messed up from whatever the hell that was back there.”

“Sorry,” Techno said. Of course it would’ve hurt him too. He doesn’t see any spots of red on Quackity, and he’s not sure if there are any on *him* either, even where his arms still sting under torn sleeves, but he doesn’t have time to check. They’re nearly clear of the worst of the roots, even though he sees them more and more now, little sprigs that have grown into bigger branches since they came through this way, and pushing their way through bigger and bigger cracks. They’ve seemed to slow for now, at least. Bad’s doing what he’d said he’d do.

When they reach the steeply sloped path back up to the next level of the mine, Techno lets Quackity go first. It’s awkward and slow going, with Karl draped over Quackity’s shoulders, feet dragging behind.

“This would be a lot easier if you’d wake up,” Quackity mutters, somewhere between annoyance and fear. “Maybe try that, Karlos.”

At that, Techno dips his head down to check on Tommy. His eyes are closed, crimson of mixed blood and angry red lines across his forehead and down his face, and his breath is shallow, but it’s *there*. If Techno leans his head close enough, just above him, foreheads nearly pressed together, he can hear the quiet wheeze as air leaves his mouth.

By the time they reach the second level, Techno’s legs are aching with the strain of walking uphill. Quackity’s breathing heavily in front of him, and moving far too slow. They really need to pick this up.

“Need a second,” Quackity gasps, and Techno feels impatience tug inside of him. They don’t exactly have free time, but he waits a moment. Waits a moment longer. Checks on Tommy again, watches the rise and fall of his chest and holds him and whispers something reassuring, useless words he won’t ever hear but Techno wants him to understand anyway.

“Just a little longer,” he tells him. “Almost there. You’re gonna be okay.”

It’s as he’s saying it that he sees another flash of light - from the tunnel above, someone making their way down, and Quackity heaves a sigh of relief.

“Thank fucking god,” Quackity says as Sapnap steps out of the mule path and rushes forward, eyes wide. “You came back!”

“Of course I did,” Sapnap says. “You okay? Oh my god, *Karl*, holy shit, what *happened*?”

“We’ll explain outside.” Quackity relinquishes Karl, nearly slumping under the relief of the weight literally lifted from his shoulders. Sapnap scoops Karl into his arms easily, checking

him over as he does.

“Holy shit,” he says again, and again. “Holy shit. You have Tommy.”

“Yeah. Wil and Tubbo?”

“Went to call for help,” Sapnap says. “Stole Dad’s car to drive out to wherever they can get service. Where is—”

“Buying us time,” Techno says. “We need to *go*.”

As if on cue, something lurches hundreds of feet below them. Techno barely keeps his balance, and Quackity yelps and grabs on to the rocky wall beside him as the ground shifts. There’s a huge crack from somewhere deep within the mines, and Techno holds his breath while everything settles.

Nothing collapses for now. Techno breathes, relieved.

There’s a moment of hesitation. Sapnap looks back in the way they’d come from, eyebrows drawn together, and he looks at Karl in his arms. He presses his lips together, and Techno watches him silently make his decision.

Without a word, Sapnap turns and rushes back up the path. Quackity follows, and Techno just behind him. Pain burns in Techno’s legs, in his arms, in something still a little broken and ragged in his chest, but he puts on as much of a burst of speed as he can. It feels like scaling a mountain, exhausting, aching, but they don’t have time to take this climb slowly. Whatever Bad’s done to hold this off isn’t gonna last a whole lot longer, and Techno thinks the whole mine is gonna come down because of it.

Good, he thinks. Let it.

Part of him wishes they could still hear him - wishes he could still bite out one last desire for them to bury themselves alive as they tear down the very ground they’re hidden under - but his head is blissfully quiet. There is only one heartbeat in his chest right where it belongs.

The ground under their feet rocks again, just as the group of them stumble out onto the first level of the mine - almost to the surface, *almost there*. There’s a sound like an explosion, a crack and a *boom*, and for a moment, Techno thinks they could’ve been transported a hundred years back, to an active mine still using explosives to break new ground.

Somewhere deep deep below him, something collapses. Something creaks and groans, and a horrible screech rends the air, a dying wail of metal-on-metal screaming into his ears and making him cringe at the sound.

It’s the elevator, just behind them.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Sapnap says, and then, “Go, go, go!”

They go.

Metal screeches and crashes behind them - elevator car falling, Techno thinks, but he does *not* take the time to turn around and confirm that. There's an explosion of dust, the ceiling above them shakes and sheds a layer of grime and fragments of rock and old metal bolts. Techno does not need to have his twin's level of understanding of old coal mines to know that those *definitely* should not have been knocked loose.

"Fuuuuck!" Quackity draws the word out, nearly limping as he half-runs just ahead of the two of them. Techno does not waste time with forming any words. He holds Tommy closer to his chest, he ignores the burning ache in his legs, and he *runs*.

His feet pound against the damp, rocky ground and he thinks it's only for some miracle that they stay under him the whole time. The very ground itself trembles. A shard of rock falls and bounces off of his shoulder, and Techno shifts Tommy's weight a little, curled over him as best as he can to shield him, and he keeps running. He hears Sapnap out of breath just ahead of him, sees Quackity in front of him - it's Techno struggling to keep up, his legs burn, his chest aches, *he's almost there he can do this he can—*

A flash of graffiti on the walls. They're almost there.

There's another resounding *crack* as the mouth of the mine finally *finally* comes into view. Homestretch; he can do this. Grey light bleeds into the pitch darkness of the cave and the yellow beams of their flashlights. Quackity's outside first, stumbling through the threshold of the mine and turning in an instant to look back, reaching hands out to Sapnap.

"Don't stop," Sapnap gasps out, barely loud enough to be heard, "Get—Get farther away from—"

Over the entrance to the mine, there is a huge wooden beam supporting the entire hill that the mine burrows under. Above their heads, there are roots and trees and rock and *land*. The woods live above them, and they are separated now only by the support of these columns of old, old logs.

Techno watches the beam shift as the ground below him pitches to the side.

He doesn't have time to think, so he doesn't. His feet are knocked out from under him, and he falls and wraps himself around Tommy and fights back to his knees, fights to his feet, doesn't think *just moves*. There is no air anymore, only dust and rock and dirt and fire in his lungs and in his limbs.

He gets up. Time is in pieces. He can't run, so he limps instead - he trips, catches himself - he needs to go go go—

For the next circle of time, all Techno knows is burning inside of him, and his brother in his arms. He hears thunder, louder than thunder, and the whole world tears itself apart under him.

And then there is grass under his knees, and someone's hands are on his shoulders and someone is taking Tommy from him. He holds on tighter, reflexively, pain arcs up his arm and through his shoulders, but he mumbles an instinctive "*No*," before he hears Quackity's voice.

“It’s just me, I’m gonna lie him down right here until the ambulance gets here. I’m not taking him. Holy shit, Techno, you’re gonna be okay, all right?”

Something about that sits funny in Techno’s head, but he can’t connect the dots and figure it out. Doesn’t know why Quackity’s comforting *him*.

He forces his arms to relax. He lets go of Tommy for the first time since he’d found him, and he can’t quite see him, can’t quite see anything. It all spins and blurs around him, vague shades of grey and red and dark brown and dead grass under him and fire in his lungs and aching in his head.

Distantly, he hears another noise - tires crunching on gravel, a motor suddenly cut, something slams—

“What the fuck just happened?!”

Wilbur. Techno looks up, forces his eyes to focus. He sees his brother running towards him, Tubbo just behind. He sees something like terror on his face and in the way he runs, the way he stares right back at Techno.

“I think the whole mine collapsed,” Sapnap’s voice says, somewhere to his side, but Techno doesn’t pay him attention now.

“Tommy,” Techno says. Tommy is at his side. Wilbur stops frozen in place. Tubbo’s hands are over his mouth.

“Oh my god,” Wilbur whispers. “Oh my god.”

He drops to his knees beside Techno. Tubbo looks like he can’t remember how to move, so he doesn’t. His eyes are fixed on Tommy’s face - pale and bloodstained and a little less grey than it had been even minutes before.

“Is he...” Tubbo doesn’t finish the thought.

“Still breathing,” Techno says.

“Oh my god,” Wilbur echoes again. He’s crying. Everything’s still spinning for Techno, and he’d kind of like to lie down until it stops. “Jesus, Tommy...”

Techno decides he’s gonna lie down.

---

Everything is blurry.

Not literally - Quackity can see, he's not hurt, he doesn't think. Things feel... They just feel *off*. But there's nothing wrong with him as far as he can tell, and when a paramedic gets there and looks him over, he's deemed fine enough to skip the ambulance ride.

Phil gets there seconds after the ambulance does. Quackity hears him, screaming loud enough to be heard over the sirens - "*They're my kids, let me through!*" - and then he sees him, illuminated in red and blue and running like his life depends on it.

It's a little too familiar of a scene, Quackity thinks. Sitting here in the woods amid flashing lights and sirens, Wilbur at his side, Phil frantic. He's not wearing his paramedic's jacket this time, and there are far more of them now. Tubbo refuses to leave Tommy's side, holds his hand tightly and Quackity knows it'll take nothing less than a force of nature to get him to let go. Techno passed out, he thinks, which makes sense. Guy's a tank, but a stupid one, and Quackity *knows* he's got at least a couple broken bones from the hit he'd taken getting Tommy out of the mine. Sapnap looks unscathed, thank god. Karl's being looked over too, and the red lines all over him look a little less angry here in the light of the just-rising sun.

"Oh my god," Phil says, running over and looking like he doesn't know who to grab into his arms first - he goes for Wilbur, then Quackity just beside him, and even when it catches him by surprise, Quackity leans into the touch. "What happened? Is everyone okay, who's hurt, what—"

"Tommy," Wilbur says, pointing to the cluster of paramedics and Tubbo— "Dad, Tommy, *Tommy*."

"Oh my *god*," Phil says again - like father, like son, Quackity thinks, remembering how Wilbur had responded earlier. He lets go of Wilbur and Quackity's shoulders and runs, off to the next child to fuss over.

It's endearing. Quackity watches his hand fly over his mouth, watches his shoulders sag, watches Tubbo throw himself into Phil's arms and hold on to him without letting go of Tommy.

It looks nice. Quackity sags a little too, looks around for Sapnap - there, by the ambulance they're loading Karl into. They make eye contact, and now Sapnap jogs over, arms held around himself like he doesn't know what to do without someone in them.

Quackity gives him someone else to hold. Sapnap wraps around him with a force just shy of crushing.

"Are you hurt?" Sapnap asks. Quackity shakes his head.

"They told me I'm fine. Nothing hurts." Nothing hurts *anymore*, at least. Whatever Techno had done - whatever had made the hole inside his chest grow angry teeth and tear at his ribs from the inside - had hurt like fucking hell and he still feels shaken up from it. There are burns on his hands too, little marks of red over his fingers where he'd tried to free Karl, contrasting against the tired yellow and green of old bruises, and those are what Sapnap focuses on now.



“Are you sure?” Sappnap asks, turning his hands over in his own. “These look bad.”

“They don’t hurt anymore,” Quackity says. “I don’t know how I’d explain them, anyway.”

Sappnap looks uncertain, and then he reaches out and pulls Quackity back against his chest. Quackity stays there in utter contentment. He puts his arms around Sappnap’s back and listens to the vibrations in his chest as he speaks. “You, Wil? Everything okay?”

“I wasn’t even here when it all fell,” Wilbur says, half dryly amused. “I’m good.”

“Mm. Techno?”

“Ambulance,” Wilbur says. “With Tommy. Looks like Tubbo’s going with them.”

Quackity turns a little, trying to look at Wilbur without letting go of Sappnap. “You going with?”

“I’ll give you guys a ride to the hospital,” Wilbur says by way of answer. “Or Dad will. I don’t think he’s going along with them.”

So they end up in Phil’s car, Wilbur up front and Sappnap and Quackity in the back. Phil gets in the driver’s seat, and there are still tears on his face. He takes a moment to scrub at them, looks across at Wilbur, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror where Quackity looks right back.

For a moment, nobody speaks. They all hold their breath.

“Okay,” Phil says. He turns the key in the ignition. “Nobody in here is hurt, right?”

“We’re good,” Wilbur says. Quackity nods in agreement.

“Couple bruises,” Sappnap agrees. “Nothing else.”

Phil nods. He starts the car down the rough trail that leads out to the highway. “Good. Okay. Good.”

It’s the calm before the storm. Quackity braces himself.

“Please explain to me,” Phil says carefully, “what the *hell* happened out there?”

There are some easy answers to give. There are some obvious ones too. Even from where they’d been back there, a little away from where the mine entrance had been, you could see the destruction it had left behind. Quackity’s not sure how far the collapse had affected the landscape, but even from there, he could see the way trees had fallen and crumpled into the ground. The hill had collapsed down into the mines, and he wouldn’t be surprised to hear of other places, in the woods, closer to town, where it had done the same. When they get out to the highway, the road leading out to their own town is blocked off.

There are other answers much harder to give. Wilbur tells them; he tells his father *everything*, he digs back to the day years ago that Phil had first come to find Wilbur and Quackity in the woods and he tells him everything. Sappnap holds Quackity’s hand. Wilbur works forward,

and he tells him about Techno's voices and about Karl and the truth about why they'd been out the day before. Quackity interjects an apology for lying to him.

They tell him about Bad. Sapnap's breath stutters a little in his chest. Quackity holds Sapnap's hand now.

Quackity tells them all what had happened, down there at the bottom of the mine. As impossible as it sounds, as confusing as it had been to watch and as hard as it is to put the feelings into words, he explains exactly what he'd seen.

Phil is quiet throughout the whole telling.

They're at the hospital by the time they've finished. Phil parks the car, and when they all pile out, he stops them.

"Don't ever," he says, "*ever*, do something like that ever again."

"Really don't want to," Wilbur says. Quackity laughs, exhausted and adrenaline-drained hysteria. Phil grabs them into a hug again, Wilbur first, one hand reaching out to pull Quackity in too and beckoning Sapnap closer as well.

"Wish you were young enough to ground you," he mutters. "I would. Until you're fifty. All of you."

"You're literally not my dad," Quackity says, but Phil silences him with another squeeze. Quackity decides to let him have this.

It's a few hours later when they're all together again, that Quackity can really start putting pieces together.

He fell asleep on a waiting room chair, and when he woke up next, Phil has somehow convinced the hospital staff to move all of his kids into one big room. Techno's awake and grumpy, one arm in a sling, and surprisingly, Ranboo's awake too when Quackity steps into the room.

"Hey," Quackity says. "I don't think we've officially met. I'm Quackity."

Ranboo blinks up at him, all grey eyes and red scars that look just like the ones on Quackity's hands. "Tubbo's brother?"

"One and the same." Tubbo answers the question for him, sat on a chair between Ranboo and Tommy's beds. Best of both worlds. "He's a dick. Be mean to him."

Quackity blinks at Tubbo, and then he sees the smile playing on Tubbo's mouth, and he grins. This is a new side of Tubbo, but he likes it. He likes seeing his little brother happy.

Ranboo's asleep again before any of them can really fill him in on what's going on. Fair enough. Quackity would *also* like to sleep again, actually. An hour in a hospital waiting room

doesn't count as rest.

It'll be awhile before Tommy wakes up, the doctor tells them. There's... a *lot* fucked up inside of him, apparently. The doctors seem baffled as to how he's alive at all, surprised he spent two weeks stuck in a mine and somehow managed to come out of it breathing, even if he looks half-starved to death.

As for Karl, they're just getting a lot of '*I don't know.*' They can't tell why he's still asleep, so they don't know when he's waking up. He's in another room, one of his own; small and sad-looking without the noise of a whole family together. Sapnap sits beside him, and Quackity starts to leave them alone to have a few minutes together.

"You know you can stay," Sapnap says when he gets up. It's a familiar phrase. Quackity remembers what seems like a lifetime ago, when Sapnap had told him the same thing on Quackity's way out of his apartment.

It's always been Sapnap and Karl together, Quackity thinks. But he's looking back, and he realizes now that it was never the two of them who made him leave.

"You can stay," Sapnap says again. He runs a hand over his eyes, and he looks up, tired and honest and tugging at Quackity's heart. "You know that, right?"

Quackity hesitates.

Years ago, a hole opened up in his chest, big enough to eat everything he touches. Big enough to swallow him up and leave nothing of himself behind. Years ago, something broke inside of him, and Quackity did everything he could to defend the shattered pieces, to protect everyone else from it - to protect *himself* from being hurt again.

He's been afraid of it for so, so long.

Years ago, Quackity made the decision that things were never going to get better, and that they would always catch up with him in the end. No matter how far he runs, no matter how much it aches, because how could anyone love a person so doomed to lose?

His whole life, Quackity thinks, he has been taking away his own reasons to stay.

He's tired of being afraid.

The ache in his chest is not gone. It lives there still, quiet and empty, and he thinks - he still believes - that it is not going to go away. He thinks it never will.

But it is not the only thing in his chest. There is still room for more to grow.

So Quackity sits down beside Sapnap, and he stays.

“You think we’ve confused the doctors enough yet?”

Wilbur spares Techno an eyebrow-raised look. They’re sitting outside the hospital, afternoon sun pouring down on them both.

“Depends,” Wilbur says. “You got any more medical mysteries to confess too?”

“Nah,” Techno says. He’s got one arm in a sling, bandaged up and warned not to move it ‘*at all, Techno,*’ which he’s not going to do because he’s not stupid and does actually want his shoulder to heal. That’s the only injury that made sense; broken shoulder where something - apparently; he doesn’t remember it - hit him on the way out of the mine. It would’ve hit Tommy, guessing by how it fell, and Techno’s just relieved it had gotten him instead of Tommy.

The other, weirder injuries are the new scars on his arms, ankles, and chest. His jacket had been shredded by the branches holding him, and there are red lines crisscrossed over his arms right where the sleeves had been torn, and the same thing on his ankles. Already, though, they don’t look quite as crimson, quite as bright, as they’d been earlier. He thinks they’re fading. He thinks all of the red scars are fading, even the ones on Ranboo’s face and the ones climbing down from Tommy’s hairline.

Even the matching ones he and Tommy have, right over their hearts, over identical scar tissue that hadn’t been there before.

The doctors are *truly* baffled by that one. When asked what happened, Techno just shrugged it off. He doesn’t think he can ever explain that it looks like he and Tommy were both stabbed in the heart and then immediately healed from it, because they *were*. There are red lines around it too, the only sign of what had healed them. The irony that *that’s* what had saved their lives. That that thing had the ability to heal and sustain, and used it on them at the same time they were doing their utmost best to drag them down.

Techno doesn’t know how much Tommy will remember when he wakes up, but for his sake, he hopes it’s not too much. He selfishly hopes he doesn’t keep the memory of his older brother stabbing him in the heart, that he won’t hold on to those and have to carry the moment in him forever the way Techno will.

He doesn’t want that to be real, as much as he knows it was.

It happened. In some way, in some place that Techno can’t quite get his head around without the thing that used to whisper in it, that *was real*.

It was real, but it’s over.

Now, he sits outside with Wilbur, and he shivers slightly in the cold. They’ll have to go back in soon, before a nurse or Phil comes looking for them. For now, though, they get to sit in some sort of peace.

They don't speak, but it's okay. It's an easy silence. It's finally, *finally*, quiet.

"You still have that plant thing I gave you?" Techno asks, remembering one last thing to clear up. Wilbur blinks, and then reaches a hand into his coat pocket. He takes out what looks like a twig, the length of his finger.

It's dried and shriveled in his hand, brown instead of crimson. It's dead. It can't hurt either of them, and Techno hates the sight of it all the same.

"We should probably burn it," Techno says. "Just to be safe."

"Right," Wilbur agrees.

Wilbur has matches in his pocket.

They burn it here in front of the hospital. As the wind picks up its ashes and scatters them, takes them so far away that Techno will never see so much of a particle of it ever again, he breathes a quiet sigh of relief.

Wilbur breathes a twin one beside him.

"We're gonna be okay," Wilbur says. He says it quietly, but it's a promise, and he raises a hand to seal it. Techno smiles softly at it - a promise held with a hushed breath and shaking fingers.

With one good hand, Techno loops his pinkie finger with his brother's. "We all will."

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Summary

Tubbo closes his eyes. He rests. He rests until Tommy is ready to open his eyes, and when they finally do, Tubbo's will open with them.

## Chapter Notes

well, we did it.

i'm not gonna get super sappy with this bc i've already spent awhile crying and i think i need to stop doing that LOL

thank you guys so, so much for reading, commenting, and supporting this fic in every way. i am absolutely blown away by the amount of love this story has received, and it means so much to me that other people have felt a this much of a connection to it.

especially thank you to my friends who've been supporting the story and me as i write it (retirement home, ilysm), to the friends i've made bc of the fic (hi clout farm), to the wonderful commenters who've been here since nearly the beginning and whose names i always recognize in my inbox - i wish i could name every one individually but it would take way too long, so instead i thank you all at once. you guys are so, so amazing and i couldn't have written all of this so quickly without you.

thank you for sticking around for this story. i appreciate every one of you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*One.*

Tubbo sleeps on the edge of Tommy's hospital bed. He crawls onto it, finds a place tucked carefully around tubes and wires and Tommy's thin, thin arms. Ranboo is asleep again, and Techno has dozed off on the chair at Tommy's other side. Phil and Wilbur went to gather some things from the house - spare clothes, blankets, pillows. Little pieces to make their hospital room feel more like home.

It already does, Tubbo thinks. He closes his eyes and listens to the steady beep of a heart monitor and Tommy's quiet breathing. He closes his eyes and for the first time in so long, he does not need to imagine that things are alright. They already are.

He closes his eyes. He rests. He rests until Tommy is ready to open his eyes, and when they finally do, Tubbo's will open with them.

*Three.*

When they bring Tommy home, Wilbur carries him inside. Tommy is loud and laughing, and it leaves a smile on Wil's face. Tubbo keeps thinking about when they were so much younger - of the time he would be jealous of this, of when he'd wish it was him who Wilbur would scoop into his arms and laugh at and carry anywhere he wanted him.

There is nothing bitter in Tubbo's stomach now. He watches his brothers tease one another, and he does it with a smile, because they're *his brothers*.

Wilbur is Tubbo's brother like something to look up to and something to look forward to; his brother in the way that when he once sat on his shoulders, he felt tall enough to face the world. He's too old for that now, and it's been a long, long time since then, but things are slowly clicking back into place.

Techno is Tubbo's brother like a steady rock. He is dependable and standing beside him is like standing by something that will never change. Even after everything, Techno will still grumble as they drag him to watch Disney movies on the couch. Even after everything, Tubbo can see the smile he's done his best to hide.

Tommy is Tubbo's brother like a hand held during a funeral and someone who screams at playground bullies so that Tubbo doesn't have to. He is Tubbo's best friend first and his brother second, or maybe the other way around, because both are hand-in-hand with the other. Tommy is a head tipped back and cackling at the sun, Tommy is climbing to the top of a tree just to see the world, Tommy is wind in Tubbo's hair and starting over fresh and tasting freedom a little more every time they're together.

Tommy is *home*, and it's a little like starting over again now that he is, but in a good way this time.

He's not himself. Not the whole way. Tubbo sees it, the way he goes quiet and the way he doesn't look at anything for a long time. He's heard it, the way his breath hitches in his sleep and he wakes up with hands reaching for someone to remind him he's real. Tubbo knows—he knows bits and pieces of what had happened down in those mines. He's still struggling to fit them all together, and part of him thinks that they might not ever fall perfectly into place. Something happened that none of them can ever put fully into words. Instead, it lives in Tommy's vacant eyes, and red scars on Techno's arms, and the way Ranboo flinches, not at loud noises like Tubbo had once thought, in a movie theatre with lights low and something stupid playing on the screen - but at the *dark*.

“I would’ve been alive in there for a long time,” Tommy tells Tubbo the night they finally go home, finally sitting on his own not-empty bed in the room they share, arms wrapped around his chest and words stuttering out like Tommy doesn’t want to say them but doesn’t know how to keep them in. “Even longer than I already was. It’s like... I was just stuck there and time had stopped. I don’t know if I would’ve ever really died, or if... if eventually you just *fall apart*.”

Tubbo hugs him. Tommy holds on to him, tight and trembling, and Tubbo doesn’t want to ever let go.

So he doesn’t.

He holds the pieces, and he puts them together.

It comes out slowly, a little at a time. Ranboo doesn’t want to talk about it; Tubbo sees right through his subject changes and mumbles of “I don’t remember.” They all drag it out of him, piece by piece.

He doesn’t have parents. That’s a surprise to none of them. He hasn’t lived with anyone in years, and he doesn’t remember back to when he *did* live with someone. It’ll take a bit more searching for them to figure out where exactly he came from, but they know where he ended up.

He knows he stumbled out of a mine and couldn’t remember how he’d gotten there, and the only thing that makes sense about it is the day - Wednesday, now almost three weeks ago.

The only one who can really explain this, Tubbo thinks, is dead and gone in something that might or might not still be alive in the bottom of a collapsed mine. So he relies on the little pieces that he gets from Ranboo, and he tries not to let it bother him too much.

“It’s been a long time since I could really remember,” Ranboo admits to Tubbo. “I don’t know how long. I really mean that one, it’s not a lie. I was somewhere dark and everything turned blurry and I don’t remember anything before it. It’s been so long, and I don’t remember where I started.”

Tubbo believes him. He doesn’t understand, not at all, but he believes the words Ranboo says. So he lets the pieces come out slowly. He’s patient. He waits. He collects these pieces, from Tommy and from Techno and from Ranboo, and he puts them together one by one.

*Seven.*

One week after everything, Ranboo is home too and he sleeps downstairs because the stairs are still a little too much for him to manage on his own. Tommy can walk perfectly fine now,



but he makes Wilbur carry him sometimes anyway. Sometimes he makes a running leap, and Wilbur staggers under the sudden weight, but he catches him every time.

One week after everything, their house is full again and it's loud and everyone is home. One week after everything, something still hangs over every last one of them and there's this feeling that lives deep in Tubbo's bones. Things aren't going to ever be the same. He knows that; it would be stupid to think they *could* go back to what they were before, and, truthfully, he doesn't want them to. This is so much better.

But something lives in all of them, in a way that creeps and aches. If Tubbo spends too long with his eyes closed, he still sees the woods, and he never wants to see them again.

One week after everything, Phil sits them down and shows them a listing for a new house, near enough to Wilbur's college you could almost walk there, and far, far away from here. There is no disagreement.

*Ten.*

*(12:18) big q: hello little baby man*

*(12:18) tubbster: fuck off*

*(12:19) big q: love you too <3*

*(12:19) big q: serious thing though. meet me at dad's in a bit, okay?*

*(12:20) tubbster: are u ok*

*(12:21) big q: yes. promise. I just need to show you.*

There used to be a boarded up house at the edge of town, where the outside hit the woods and the inside was something Tubbo never wanted to see again. Once upon a time, the worst years of Tubbo's life went by in this white-fenced carefully-maintained home, like a too-perfect disguise. There used to be a shed in the back where Tubbo and Ranboo hid from a storm, and the same shed where he and Quackity hid from another.

There used to be a road that was not blocked off by caution tape that Tubbo now ducks under, dry leaves crunching under his feet as he makes his way down cracked asphalt and worn paint lines.

The house is more of a ruin now. Tubbo realizes quickly what's happened and what it is that Quackity brought him here for. The shed is gone entirely, and the trees in the back have fallen and broken and lie on their sides and in the ground. It's a little too on the nose, Tubbo thinks,

that part of the mine had stretched out this far. That a sinkhole would open *just here*. That some evils are too strong to let live, even only in memory.

Quackity waits for him on the sidewalk in front of what still stands of their old house. He waves as Tubbo approaches, one hand still shoved in the pocket of a colorblock windbreaker that is definitely not his.

“Damn,” Tubbo says. He looks at the devastation behind Quackity.

“Yep,” Quackity says, the word popping from his lips. “I mean, good riddance, right?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo agrees. “Yeah. Good fucking riddance.”

“They’re tearing down the rest of it next week,” Quackity says. “They’ll fill the sinkhole and probably sell the property for somebody else to build on.”

Huh.

It’s funny, imagining the house gone. Imagining the whole place as flat ground with nothing on it. Imagining the backdrop for so much horror disappearing without so much as a scar left behind. It’s funny in the way that sits heavy and awkward in his stomach and makes his skin crawl a bit.

“I won’t be around to see it,” Tubbo says.

“When are you guys leaving?” Quackity asks. He stares straight ahead.

“Soon as we can.” Tubbo kicks a rock. He doesn’t look at Quackity either. “Nobody wants to be here anymore.”

He nods. “I get it.”

Tubbo finally looks at him. There’s something heavy in his eyes, so he asks. “Are you guys... You’re staying?”

“No,” Quackity says, and it comes out almost in a laugh. “Jesus, no. Sap’s... I mean, we’re figuring it out still, you know? He wants to sell Bad’s place, and there’s a lot to go through, and we haven’t even gotten to it. Karl’s still taking up so much of both of our attention, obviously. His memory’s coming back, though! He’s getting there. It’ll take a bit before we’re all sorted out enough to go, but... Nah. We’re leaving.”

It sits in Tubbo’s chest. A little bit of an ache, a bit of a sting. He doesn’t want to be left behind again. He doesn’t want to be the one to leave either.

Quackity is Tubbo’s brother. He is his brother like an old memory, bittersweet and hauntingly sad and something he misses and hates and wants to hold on to. He is his brother like the sting of old bruises and a shield in front of him to stop them, his brother like a tired smile and arms to fall into when nobody else quite understands.

But Quackity is his brother like a fresh start too. It's been years, and neither of them are the person they were then. Tubbo is glad for that; he's glad for the light that sometimes sneaks into Quackity's eyes and the little smile in them. He's glad for the way he teases, the way they've so easily fallen into a rhythm that is new but comfortable and *good*. He's glad for this new side of his brother. He's glad for the person they've both become.

And maybe he shouldn't be - it's only been a week. Maybe he should learn his lesson already and stop caring so much. Tubbo has had an entire lifetime, condensed into the seventeen short years he's been alive, to learn that he is not allowed to hold on. He has loved and lost so often that by now he should know he would be a fool to try again.

But Tubbo is stubborn, and frankly, he is a bit of a fool. All that he's learned, he thinks, is to hold on with two hands instead of one.

Tubbo turns his head to look at his brother - his *first* brother, his shield - and he says, "You should find an apartment near us. Close enough to visit."

Quackity smiles. "Yeah? You still want me around?"

"I mean, duh," Tubbo says. "You're my brother."

He looks at him, breathless, and his mouth twitches like he doesn't know what to say. What he says, eventually, is, "Do you want to get ice cream?"

It's the end of October, and the weather has already started to drop below freezing. They might get an early snow, but Tubbo's hoping it holds out until after they move. Wilbur keeps worrying that the weight of snow will cause more sinkholes, and now Tubbo's worried about it too. Wilbur and his fucking morbid thoughts.

But he and Quackity get ice cream anyway, and they shiver while they eat it and things are *good*.

Things are good, things are good, and Tubbo thinks maybe, this is something he is allowed to keep. He says it out loud, a quiet admission.

"You're not the only one who's cursed, I think."

And Quackity doesn't look surprised. He only looks sad.

"Do you think," Quackity asks, "that you'll ever stop being cursed?"

Tubbo's not sure how to answer it. The truth is that he doesn't know. Maybe someday they *will*; maybe this thing they both went through is gonna stop being the biggest thing that's ever happened to them. Maybe it's already happening now. Maybe someday, they can look back and know things are going to be different.

There's a lot he wants to say. There's a lot he doesn't know how to put into words - feelings bubble under his skin and rattle in his chest, and they stay there wordless and huge.

“I don’t know,” Tubbo says finally. “I don’t think it’ll go away.”

“It doesn’t,” Quackity agrees. “But it gets easier.”

So Tubbo decides that’s going to be good enough.

*Fourteen.*

One month to the day that Tommy walked outside after Tubbo yelled at him and nobody stopped him from leaving, Tubbo and Tommy sit on the living room floor and they watch as the clock ticks to 10:00.

One month.

Neither of them say it, because they don’t have to. Both of them watch the clock a little too intently to not know what the other is remembering. Behind them, Ranboo sleeps on the couch, and around them sit boxes ready to move tomorrow. It’s their last night here.

“You know,” Tubbo says, voice quiet to not wake Ranboo, “I really am sorry. For yelling.”

Tommy says, “I yelled back. You don’t have to be.”

“It was the last thing I said to you.”

Tubbo sets this down. He sets down this weight he’s held for a month to the day, to the *minute*, and he looks to Tommy for forgiveness.

“I had a lot of time to think,” Tommy says. “All of time, actually. And I never was mad at you for a moment of it.”

“It was the *last thing I said to you*,” Tubbo repeats, and there’s a lump in his throat and a sting in his eyes. “Tommy, I—I don’t even remember what we were fighting about. I can’t remember why, it was so dumb, and it would’ve been the last thing I ever told you.”

“Tubbo.” Tommy takes his hands in his, and Tubbo stifles a sob in his throat. “I know you love me. Even if you’re a dick sometimes and yell about it, I still know you love me deep down.”

Tubbo laughs, tears on his face, and he says, “Good. God, I-I don’t know what I would’ve done if—”

“And that’s a lie, actually,” Tommy interrupts, before Tubbo has a chance to say anything else. “You’re like, never a dick. You’re actually really cool and it was weird that you yelled at me that night.”

“Thanks,” Tubbo says, not sure if he should be laughing or crying but he swipes a hand over his face and giggles through the tears anyway.

“You know I love you too? Even when we fight?”

“Of course,” Tubbo says. “I’d never doubt it.”

“Good,” Tommy says. And he leans forward, wraps Tubbo in a hug and Tubbo holds him as tightly as he can. This is one of a hundred hugs they’ve shared the last two weeks, but Tubbo is in no hurry to let go.

“Why’re we crying?” Ranboo’s sleepy voice asks from the couch, and there’s a shuffle of fabric as he moves closer to the two of them.

“We’re not crying,” Tommy says, and Tubbo hears the unmistakable snuffle in his voice as he says it. “You’re crying, actually.”

“Pretty sure I’m not,” Ranboo says. Tommy rolls his eyes, and he sticks one arm out.

“C’mere, boob boy,” Tommy says. “Hug or go back to sleep and shut up.”

It had taken only three days and a handful of darkly resentful comments about Ranboo replacing him for Tommy to come around and decide he liked him after all. Tubbo had once walked in on a conversation he wasn’t meant to see, he’s pretty sure, the two of them sat on a couch and talking in low voices and when Tubbo had walked down the stairs, they both went quiet and just looked at him.

And that’s okay, he’d decided. They both get it in a way he doesn’t. He’ll let them have that.

Because none of them are okay yet. Phil barely sleeps; he checks on all of them at least once a night, and they all pretend they don’t hear him creaking open doors in the dead of night and counting his children to make sure they’re all here. Techno worries Tubbo with the way he looks back over his shoulder sometimes, but he says he doesn’t hear anything. It’s an ingrained response, just to make sure. Wilbur is lowering walls he’s had up for years, and it’s... it’s painful for all of them, Tubbo thinks. All of them know what he’s done now. All of sudden, it’s fallen into place for him, and Tubbo understands why he’d left. He makes sure Wilbur knows he’s glad he came back.

None of them are okay yet, but they’re fallen apart and building back up in ways that everyone else can see now. They’re healing the way they’re supposed to this time, Tubbo guesses.

It’s their last night here, and they spend it in the living room. Techno joins them without any coaxing or grumbling necessary. It goes so simply: it’s the three of them, and then Techno is there too. Tubbo leans his head on his good shoulder, and he decides he’ll doze there for the night. Sleepily, he registers when Wilbur brings extra blankets and pillows. When Phil comes to check on them, he joins the nest and they all move enough to make room for him, and then they sleep again.

They rest.

Tomorrow, they will leave this house behind. They'll leave the town they've all spent most of their lives in. Tubbo will say goodbye to Quackity - just for now, just until he sees him again - and they'll pile into Phil's car and Techno's and the moving truck that Wilbur will drive. Tommy will roll the window down and stick his head out and scream, "*So fucking long, you shit town! See you never!*" and Phil will laugh and tell him to get his head back inside. They'll drive through woods that Tubbo will never walk through again, until they get to a new place to call home.

Tomorrow, they will try again. They won't start over, because this thing that's happened doesn't go away, and it will always be part of all of them. But they will try again. They will find somewhere new to heal.

But that's all for tomorrow.

Tonight, Tubbo puts his head on Techno's shoulder, and Tommy puts his head on Tubbo's chest. Ranboo curls away from Tubbo with one hand draped over him just near enough to touch, and he can hear Wilbur's breathing on Techno's other side and he can see Phil settling an extra blanket over each of them. Tubbo's phone is just within reach, and a goodnight message from Quackity still waits in his notifications.

Tonight, his family is all here. They are safe, and they may not be *okay*, but they are *loved*.

Tubbo closes his eyes, and he rests.

## Chapter End Notes

one last reminder that my tumblr is rebelpeas and you are welcome to chat with me about dt and dsmp in general! i'd love to see you over there! <3

also - check out the fact that this fic is part of a series now. you should definitely subscribe to it for no particular reason or anything ;)

## End Notes

giveaway in the comments section, leave a comment and you could win my undying love and affection /p

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